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Reading, Writing, and Religion in Nineteenth-Century France: The Popular Reception of Renan's *Life of Jesus**

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In 1897, the fifteen-year-old future poet Catherine Pozzi sought a solution to the problem of religious truth. As disillusioned with Catholic ritual as she was irritated by the proselytizing of her Protestant English tutor, she nonetheless retained a certain intuitive faith in God and admiration for Jesus. Writing in her diary, Catherine imagined a time when she might emerge from this adolescent uncertainty: "When I am married (if I get married), or anyway when I am twenty years old, I will make my *coup d'état*. This will be to collect all the books on Protestantism, all the books on Catholicism, all the books written on the many philosophies; and all the books, also, by Ernest Renan. I will read them all patiently, a little at a time. And I will try to form an opinion."¹ Pozzi wrote these lines in a fin de siècle France that historians usually characterize in terms of an increasingly belligerent confrontation between republican secularism and resurgent Catholicism. But this young girl did not classify the world according to the binary oppositions of the "culture wars" that seemed to consume Europe in her period.² Not only were there multiple possible religious philosophies, there was also a lone figure that stood apart from them all: Renan.

This article will demonstrate that Pozzi was not the first to believe that Renan's work offered the materials for an alternative religious identity that eluded the

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¹ Catherine Pozzi, *Journal de jeunesse, 1893–1906* (Paris, 1995), 121. For discussion of Pozzi's journal, see Philippe Lejeune, *Le Moi des demoiselles: Enquête sur le journal de jeune fille* (Paris, 1993), esp. 265–90. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

² See the influential collection, Christopher Clark and Wolfram Kaiser, eds., *Culture Wars: Secular-Catholic Conflict in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Cambridge, 2003). For a

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sectarian divisions of post-Enlightenment Europe. In the aftermath of the publication of his most popular book, *Life of Jesus* (*Vie de Jésus*) in 1863, dozens of French men and women wrote to Renan and confided their conviction that his work had the potential to rejuvenate the Christian heritage, not to destroy it.³ Renan's controversial biography of Jesus was one of the nineteenth century's nonfiction sensations, disseminating the radical conclusions of Protestant biblical criticism to an unprecedented popular audience. Historians often characterize the book as an anti-Christian work that weakened religious faith, or even an intellectual prelude to the belligerent secularism of the Third Republic.⁴ In fact many of the book's admirers appreciated it not as an anti-Catholic or antireligious icon, but rather as a narrative of Jesus's life that restored to Christianity an essential truth. This new image was grounded in the humanity of Christ and found its harmonious expression in Renan's evocative prose. In certain of these cases, readers narrated their reading of *Life of Jesus* as the bridge from religious doubt to affirmation and a revived belief in the reality of Jesus, portraying the book as the catalyst for recasting their religious identities. I will explore in particular the voluminous correspondence of an unknown woman immortalized in the archive catalogue as the proper noun *l'Inconnue*. This woman used letters to Renan as theaters for experimentation with her religious convictions in the light of his books, without ever leaving a return address. Alongside these admiring testimonies in the author's correspondence archives are letters from angry Catholics lambasting the author for his apostasy. But a variety of women forsook this contemptuous tone and instead implored him to think about the social effects of his book's attack on Christian faith and the perils of religious indifference. I will highlight the case of Cornélie Delort: a Parisian *bourgeoise* who combined this

social-historical reconsideration of this approach, see Oliver Zimmer, "Beneath the 'Culture War': Corpus Christi Processions and Mutual Accommodation in the Second German Empire," *Journal of Modern History* 82 (June 2010): 288–334.

³ Ernest Renan, *Histoire des Origines du Christianisme: Livre premier; Vie de Jésus*, in *Œuvres complètes de Ernest Renan* (hereafter OC), ed. Henriette Psichari, 10 vols. (Paris, 1947–61), 4:9–427. Letters to Renan from "unknown" correspondents—those who wrote to Renan without being known to him either through a preexisting personal relationship or by virtue of being notable—are held in the Collections Scheffer-Renan at the Musée de la Vie Romantique, Paris (hereafter CSR). A few similar letters can be found in the Renan papers at the Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris (hereafter BnF), particularly in NAF 11495 ("Correspondance diverse et bibliographie") and NAF 14603 ("Lettres adressées à Ernest Renan"), although these primarily hold letters from scholarly acquaintances.

⁴ Owen Chadwick, *The Secularisation of the European Mind in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1975), 211–28; echoed recently by Joseph F. Byrnes, *Catholic and French Forever: Religious and National Identity in Modern France* (University Park, PA, 2005), xv, 84, 93; Michael Burleigh, *Earthly Powers: Religion and Politics in Europe from the Enlightenment to the Great War* (London, 2005), 221–22; Frederick Brown, *For the Soul of France: Culture Wars in the Age of Dreyfus* (New York, 2010), 14–22.

social perspective with a critique of *Life of Jesus* grounded in reason and textual analysis rather than a priori dismissal.

Taken together, these letters reorient our perspective on the relationship between science, reading, and religious belief at midcentury. They suggest that we should be open to exploring the multiple intellectual and spiritual positions that ordinary people generated through their interactions with texts such as Renan's, rather than relying on a teleological view of the nineteenth century that depends on projecting the stark divisions of the turn of the century back onto the more complex and ambivalent atmosphere of midcentury spiritual politics.

Approaching *Life of Jesus* from the perspective of its readers offers a new perspective on a sensation that historians have neglected and have primarily understood as a moment in intellectual rather than cultural history. Renan himself remains an obscure character in the history of ideas, with no obvious modern legacy to generate scholarly interest besides a single famous lecture on nationalism.⁵ While scholars following Edward Said have returned to Renan's texts (including *Life of Jesus*) to investigate his role in the popularization of ideas of racial difference, they have taken his cultural influence as given, believing that he had enough scholarly "currency" to implant his ideas among the French public.⁶ Those who have investigated the *Life of Jesus* controversy of 1863 in more detail have examined a narrow range of published writers and pamphleteers.⁷ They have consequently tended to ignore the book's distinctive sentimentality and style and to focus on its impact as an emblem of science or historical "positivism." But Renan's correspondence archives suggest that the two cannot be easily disentangled in understanding the book's provocation and success.

By assessing the relationship between a notionally irreligious book and lay religious beliefs, this article complements the recent reassessment of religion in nineteenth-century France. In the last two decades, historians such as Caroline Ford, Ruth Harris, and Thomas Kselman have produced studies that are sensitive to the tensions and interactions between religious authorities, state institutions,

⁵ Ernest Renan, "Qu'est-ce qu'une nation? Conférence faite en Sorbonne, le 11 mars 1882," in *OC*, 1:887–906. The literature on Renan and nationalism is too voluminous to cite, but for a critique see Pierre Birnbaum, "Le retour d'Ernest Renan," *Critique* 6–7, nos. 697–98 (2005): 518–23.

⁶ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London, 2003), 123–48, and, on Renan's "currency," esp. 130–31; Tzvetan Todorov, *On Human Diversity: Nationalism, Racism, and Exoticism in French Thought*, trans. Catherine Porter (London, 1992), 50–55, 140–53; Maurice Olenker, *The Languages of Paradise: Race, Religion, and Philology in the Nineteenth Century*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (London, 1992), chap. 4.

⁷ Alan Pitt, "The Cultural Impact of Science in France: Ernest Renan and the *Vie de Jésus*," *Historical Journal* 43 (2000): 79–101; Jean-Yves Mollier, "La réception idéologique de la *Vie de Jésus*," *Œuvres et critiques* 26, no. 2 (2001): 100–118; Perinne Simon-Nahum, "Le scandale de la *Vie de Jésus* de Renan: Du succès littéraire comme mode d'échec de la science," *Mil neuf cent* 25 (2007): 61–74.

and ordinary people.⁸ They have suggested that religious belief was a powerful and dynamic force in nineteenth-century politics and society, rather than a curious anachronism. Historians have especially highlighted the importance of gender to debates over religion and secularization in the period, arguing that, in Ford's words, "the female image was at the symbolic center of the postrevolutionary struggle between the Catholic Church and a secularizing state."⁹ Women's predominance in French Catholic congregations became increasingly apparent during the nineteenth century; but while republican anticlericals feared priests' influence over women's allegedly weak minds, female religious explored avenues for agency and self-fashioning that were often denied them in the secular realm.¹⁰ Renan represented neither church nor state, was ambivalent toward both Catholicism and republicanism, and yet seems to have made a significant intervention in the debates over religion that divided French society. While we are accustomed to contrasting the increasing "feminization" of religion with a male-dominated scientific and anticlerical establishment, a significant feature of the *Life of Jesus* debates was the fear that Renan, a totem of late-century scientism, had made a calculated appeal to feminine sensibility through his novelistic style. Underpinning the entire controversy were the thousands of individuals who either thrilled or dismayed cultural authorities by getting their hands on the book. Though their views are difficult to unearth, historians of reading have demonstrated how personal testimonies and private documents can be used to explore the popular reception of texts.¹¹ The growing literature on epistolary practices demonstrates

⁸ Key works include Thomas A. Kselman, *Death and the Afterlife in Modern France* (Princeton, NJ, 1993); Sarah A. Curtis, *Educating the Faithful: Religion, Schooling, and Society in Nineteenth-Century France* (DeKalb, IL, 2000); Caroline Ford, *Divided Houses: Religion and Gender in Modern France* (London, 2005); Ruth Harris, *Lourdes: Body and Spirit in the Secular Age* (London, 1999). Certain of these trends originated in earlier historiography, for which see Eugen Weber's review essay "Religion and Superstition in Nineteenth-Century France," *Historical Journal* 31 (1988): 399–423.

⁹ Ford, *Divided Houses*, 115.

¹⁰ The classic statement of this brand of anticlericalism is Jules Michelet, *Du Prêtre, de la Femme, de la Famille* (Paris, 1845). The key work on female religious is Claude Langlois, *Le Catholicisme au féminin: Les congrégations françaises à supérieure générale au XIX siècle* (Paris, 1984). For some difficulties with the idea of feminism through religion, see Harris, *Lourdes*, 361–63; and Ford, *Divided Houses*, 142.

¹¹ General works include Martin Lyons, *Readers and Society in Nineteenth-Century France: Workers, Women, Peasants* (Basingstoke, 2001); James Smith Allen, *In the Public Eye: A History of Reading in Modern France, 1800–1940* (Princeton, NJ, 1991), 111, and "Reading the Novel," in *Reception Study: From Literary Theory to Cultural Studies*, ed. James L. Machor and Philip Goldstein (London, 2001), 180–202; and esp. Judith Lyon-Caen, *La Lecture et la Vie: Les usages du roman au temps de Balzac* (Paris, 2006). Studies from outside the history of reading have incorporated reader-author correspondence; see, e.g., Antoine Compagnon, *Connaissez-vous Brunetière? Enquête sur un antidreyfusard et ses amis* (Paris, 1997); Jan Goldstein, *The Post-Revolutionary*

that letters, in particular, have substantial historical value when viewed as instruments of intimate self-fashioning.¹² Women's letters are a prominent feature of Renan's correspondence archive: they account for around a fifth of letters from identifiable writers and are often among the longest. So often spoken for in print literature, both devout and dissenting women scaled the hierarchies of gender and academic authority, using their letters to assert their intellectual autonomy. Their independent interventions in the debate surrounding *Life of Jesus* belied both the religious authorities, who enjoined women to seek patriarchal supervision and read nothing but the most pious texts, and secular elites, who believed that women's religious faith entailed docility and obedience.¹³ This buttresses Dena Goodman's argument that the private domain of reflexive reading and letter writing was an important locus for the development of modern gendered subjectivity, and my analysis will reiterate her emphasis on how the limitations on public expression continued to shape new forms of private communication.¹⁴

This analysis contributes to a broader reconsideration of the relationship between religion and modernity in Europe that has ceased to see the two as necessarily contradictory forces.¹⁵ Superficially, the controversy surrounding *Life of Jesus* would seem to embody the themes of expanding access to print and privatization of religious belief that have characterized what Chadwick memorably called the "secularization of the European mind" ever since the Reformation. But many of Renan's correspondents consciously used their reading and writing practices to engage in a process of reconciliation between faith and reason, and they were often optimistic about the possibility of securing the transit of aspects of the Christian heritage, particularly the figure of Jesus, into modern culture. In this

Self: Politics and Psyche in France, 1750–1850 (Cambridge, MA, 2005), 173–76; Patrick Singy, "The Popularization of Medicine in the Eighteenth Century: Writing, Reading, and Rewriting Samuel Auguste Tissot's *Avis au peuple sur sa santé*," *Journal of Modern History* 82 (2010): 774–83.

¹² For epistolary conventions, see Roger Chartier, Alain Boureau, and Cécile Dauphin, eds., *Correspondence: Models of Letter-Writing from the Middle Ages to the Nineteenth Century*, trans. Christopher Woodall (Princeton, NJ, 1997), 112–57. A broad and illuminating study of correspondence among noble families with broader implications is Marie-Claire Grassi, *L'Art de la lettre au temps de la Nouvelle Héloïse et du romantisme* (Geneva, 1994). Other collections dealing with gender and/or the family are Christine Planté, ed., *L'Épistolaire, un genre féminin?* (Paris, 1998); Rebecca Earle, ed., *Epistolary Selves: Letters and Letter-Writers, 1600–1945* (Aldershot, 1999); Anne-Marie Sohn, ed., *La correspondance, un document pour l'Histoire* (Rouen, 2002); Caroline Bland and Mâire Cross, eds., *Gender and Politics in the Age of Letter-Writing, 1750–2000* (Aldershot, 2004).

¹³ See the discussion of republican and Catholic women's reading models in Lyons, *Readers and Society*, chap. 4.

¹⁴ Dena Goodman, *Becoming a Woman in the Age of Letters* (Ithaca, NY, 2009).

¹⁵ A recent attempt to come to terms with the voluminous new literature on religion in modern societies is the enormous interdisciplinary collection edited by Hent de Vries, *Religion: Beyond a Concept* (New York, 2008).

respect, the response to *Life of Jesus* might be viewed as the French chapter in the emergence of what Jonathan Sheehan has suggestively labeled the "cultural Bible": a development among nineteenth-century Europeans who continued to see the Bible as a document of enduring importance but transformed it from a repository of literal theological truth into a "cornerstone of the poetic, moral, and pedagogical values of Western civilization."¹⁶ Sheehan has identified this development with the literate culture of Protestant Europe, and he dates its appearance in Germany by the 1830s and Britain by the 1870s. But applying this model is problematic because unlike the writers Sheehan examined, the ex-seminarian Renan does not emerge in any simplistic sense "out of the soil of the Protestant Reformation."¹⁷ Moreover, Pozzi's deliberations exemplify the fact that Renan's admirers were often ambivalent toward both Protestantism and much of Catholicism. Like Renan himself, they developed their new formulations about Jesus outside the structures of organized religion, while insisting that they believed that they and the author remained, in one correspondent's phrase, "religious in the broadest sense of the term."¹⁸ In *Life of Jesus*, they sought (and sometimes found) a transcendent quality that went beyond the book's secular academic conclusions. Though this article follows recent scholars' insistence that religious content was not incompatible with modernity's new cultural forms, it thus also argues that we need to think more carefully about how we define "religious" content in an age when debates about the character and definition of religion evidently reached beyond the walls of academia and into the homes of French men and women.

LIFE OF JESUS AND THE PRINT RESPONSE

Published on June 24, 1863, *Life of Jesus* was a purportedly objective historical reconsideration of the origins of Christianity that became one of the best-selling and most controversial books in nineteenth-century Europe. Its author, Ernest Renan, was a Breton of humble origins who had once trained to be a priest, but began to doubt his faith and abandoned the seminary in 1845. He subsequently

¹⁶ Jonathan Sheehan, *The Enlightenment Bible: Translation, Scholarship, Culture* (Oxford, 2005), 220, though see also chap. 3 in general. Sheehan's point of departure is eighteenth-century studies, which has provided the most sustained recent reconsideration of the issues of religion and secularization in modern intellectual history. See also Jonathan Sheehan, "Enlightenment, Religion, and the Enigma of Secularization: A Review Essay," *American Historical Review* 108 (2003): 1061–80. Ronald Schechter has offered some useful comments on the risks of overusing the notion of the "religious" in his "Review: David Sorkin, *The Religious Enlightenment: Protestants, Jews and Catholics from London to Vienna* (2008)," *H-France Review* 10 (2010): 822–23.

¹⁷ Sheehan, *Enlightenment Bible*, 1.

¹⁸ Albert Deloge to Ernest Renan, February 18, 1864, CSR, Ms37.53.

pursued a remarkably successful career as a Parisian academic. Renan began the project that became *Life of Jesus* during a year-long archaeological visit to the Levant in 1860–61, which was cut short when his sister and intellectual companion Henriette died from a tropical illness.¹⁹ Renan made much of this visit in the resulting book: the Holy Land was “a fifth gospel, torn but still legible,” and the experience of reading the Gospels in their birthplace had transformed the abstract idea of Jesus into a true, human, historical figure.²⁰ On his return to Paris, Renan was elected to the chair of Hebrew at the Collège de France, where in his inaugural lecture on February 21, 1861, he hinted at his conclusions by declaring Jesus “an incomparable man.”²¹ This overtly minimalist description of the founder of Christianity provoked a minor riot in the Latin Quarter. Though Renan’s lecture came at the dawn of the Second Empire’s period of liberalization, the government was cautious not to jeopardize its position among devout Catholics and immediately suspended him from his post.²² Their censure only hardened his conviction that he should bring his ideas about Jesus to a much broader audience.

Life of Jesus declared that historians should treat the Gospels like any other historical source: not as divinely inspired eyewitness accounts, but as mutually contradictory “legendary biographies” compiled over decades by multiple authors.²³ In a context where the Vatican had pushed to confirm the Immaculate Conception as dogma (1854) and devout Catholics flocked to miracle sites such as La Salette (1846) and Lourdes (1856), the book’s introduction declared that we must “banish the miracle from history.”²⁴ Renan stripped Jesus of his divinity, rejected accounts of his miraculous powers, turned his death into a legal formality, and found a dark depression at the heart of his psychology. The human figure that Renan claimed to rescue from beneath the weight of Christian dogma

¹⁹ A useful narrative is Jean Pommier, “Un voyageur français au Proche-Orient: Renan et sa mission de Phénicie,” *Les Annales Conferencia* 176 (1965): 5–21. For the writing process, see Prosper Alféric’s peerless account in *Les Manuscrits de la “Vie de Jésus” d’Ernest Renan* (Paris, 1939), xvi–lxiii.

²⁰ Renan, *OC*, 4:80.

²¹ Ernest Renan, “De la part des peuples sémitiques dans l’histoire de la civilisation,” in *OC*, 2:329.

²² One concise account is Comte Horace de Viel Castel, *Mémoires sur le règne de Napoléon III (1851–1864)*, 6 vols. (Paris, 1885), 6:158; the act of suspension appeared in *Moniteur*, February 27, 1862. Renan responded that March with an essay defending academic freedom (Ernest Renan, “La chaire d’hébreu au Collège de France: Explications à mes collègues,” in *OC*, 1:143–72).

²³ Renan, *OC*, 4:74.

²⁴ Renan, *OC*, 4:78. For La Salette, see François Angelier and Claude Langlois, eds., *La Salette: Apocalypse, pèlerinage et littérature, 1856–1996* (Grenoble, 2000); for Lourdes and the Immaculate Conception, see Harris, *Lourdes*; for miracles in general, see Thomas A. Kselman, *Miracles and Prophecies in Nineteenth-Century France* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1983).

was nonetheless a "sublime" moral genius, the greatest of great men, and founder of Western civilization.²⁵

Renan was not the first European academic to historicize the Gospels or call Jesus's divinity into question. The German theologian David Friedrich Strauss had done so decades earlier in *The Life of Jesus, Critically Examined* (*Das Leben Jesu, kritisch bearbeitet*). This work of dense biblical criticism had fast become notorious in Protestant Europe, although it does not seem to have had the same impact on the other side of the Rhine.²⁶ In France, Renan followed in the wake of Romantic and socialist writers like Étienne Cabet and Edgar Quinet who had revived Christ for nineteenth-century sensibilities, though he rejected the idea of reducing Jesus to an ideological commitment or a purely symbolic existence.²⁷ Renan's achievement was instead to rearticulate many of Protestant theology's radical conclusions through a particularly fluid and vivid reconstruction of Jesus's human life. The opening chapters of *Life of Jesus* explained how Jesus's personality was not divinely ordained but forged in the historical conditions of first-century Galilee. Drawing on his travel experiences to legitimate his historical conclusions, Renan described the region's rustic charm in lavish detail, repeatedly contrasting it with the climatically and dogmatically stifling air of Pharisaic Jerusalem—a procedure that essentially Europeanized Jesus.²⁸ Galilee's fertile surroundings imbued Jesus with a love of nature, while Nazareth's distance from Jerusalem's pedantic Judaism opened his mind to a nondogmatic religion.²⁹ In the later chapters, Jesus emerged as an individual whose innovative doctrines were

²⁵ Renan, *OC*, 4:370.

²⁶ David Friedrich Strauss, *The Life of Jesus, Critically Examined*, trans. George Eliot, 3 vols. (London, 1846). Though Strauss was translated into French by Émile Littré in 1839, his book does not appear to have had the same resonance in France. Littré's preface to the 1853 edition, which outlined a Comtean perspective on miracles, did attract some attention; see David Friedrich Strauss, *Vie de Jésus, ou examen critique de son histoire*, trans. Émile Littré, 2 vols. (Paris, 1853). The exception to this picture is Strasbourg, where German biblical criticism had a more sustained influence around the local Protestant Faculty of Theology and its *Revue de théologie et de philosophie chrétienne*, more popularly known as the *Revue de Strasbourg*. When Strauss wrote a new life of Jesus in the 1860s, two Strasbourg Protestants decided to translate it; see David Friedrich Strauss, *Nouvelle vie de Jésus*, trans. Auguste Nefftzer and Charles Dollfus (Paris, 1864).

²⁷ See Frank Paul Bowman, *Le Christ romantique* (Geneva, 1973), and *Le Christ des barricades 1789–1848* (Paris, 1987); Paul Bénichou, *Le temps des prophètes: Doctrines de l'âge romantique* (Paris, 1977), 492–95; Edward Berenson, *Populist Religion and Left-Wing Politics in France, 1830–1852* (Princeton, NJ, 1984); Pamela Pilbeam, "Dream Worlds? Religion and the Early Socialists in France," *Historical Journal* 43 (2000): 499–515. Cf. Renan's explicit rejection of the association between Jesus and modern socialism (*OC*, 4:264).

²⁸ Olender, *Languages of Paradise*, 68–71; Susannah Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany* (Oxford, 2010), 33–38.

²⁹ Renan, *OC*, 4:105–6.

grounded in his human personality; for example, his humble origins explained the “transcendental disdain” in which he held the material world.³⁰ Renan plunged readers into Jesus’s private thoughts and feelings. He evoked the melancholy Jesus must have felt toward the end, knowing the religious establishment would come for him. He wondered whether Jesus would have regretted abandoning his simple rural life, “the vine and fig tree under which he had been able to rest, the young girls who perhaps let themselves love him.”³¹ Renan’s narrative of the Passion used recent research on Roman crucifixion to add details of corporal trauma to this psychological torment. It described in detail how Jesus was stripped naked and erected on the cross so that his feet “almost touched the earth” while nails were driven into his hands. After three hours, Jesus’s “delicate constitution” gave way, sparing him from a protracted death from starvation.³² While some of Jesus’s followers loved him so much as to believe in a resurrection, the truth was that he died that day and never returned.³³

Renan’s celebration of Jesus the man depended on an androgynous model of male heroism that offered a provocative counterpoint to the Mariolatry of contemporary French Catholicism. Citing Mary’s minimal presence in the Gospels, Renan denied any importance to Jesus’s mother or indeed to his wider family. Jules Michelet was horrified that *Life of Jesus* had “suppressed the mother of Jesus,” but he failed to recognize how the book transferred Mary’s stereotypically feminine virtues of chastity and compassion onto Jesus himself.³⁴ Every facet of Jesus’s character betrayed his androgynous charm, from his facial beauty to the “strong, sweet union of ideas between the two sexes” that his gentle manners inspired.³⁵ Renan wrote that, like a woman, Jesus had a heightened sense of self-awareness and “extreme personal sensitivity.”³⁶ These qualities inspired a particular devotion among female followers and Renan repeatedly insisted that early Christianity was in many senses a women’s movement.³⁷ Women were driven in part by their very human unrequited love for Jesus, but also by the innate religiosity that Renan, like many Frenchmen in the period, ascribed to them. Paul Seeley has shown that irreligious liberal fathers often raised their sons as Catholics so that they would have “their mother’s religion,” seeing the son’s supposedly inevitable loss of faith as part of his natural transition to manhood.³⁸ Renan was

³⁰ Ibid., 160.

³¹ Ibid., 321.

³² Ibid., 346–47.

³³ Ibid., 370.

³⁴ Jules Michelet to Alfred Dumesnil, July 12, 1863, in Jules Michelet, *Correspondance générale*, ed. Louis Le Guillou, 12 vols. (Paris, 1994–2001), 10:403.

³⁵ Renan, *OC*, 4:136, 180.

³⁶ Ibid., 133.

³⁷ Ibid., 129, 204.

³⁸ Paul Seeley, “O Sainte Mère: Liberalism and the Socialization of Catholic Men in Nineteenth-Century France,” *Journal of Modern History* 70 (1998): 862–91. On the rev-

similarly ambivalent about the consequences of feminine religiosity. On the one hand, women were to be celebrated for their role in exalting Jesus's message; on the other, their enthusiasm drove Christianity into the superstitious territory that Renan notionally abhorred. His ambivalence was embodied in a florid passage that celebrated how only "the passion of a hallucinatory woman"—Mary Magdalene—could have created the compelling myth of the Resurrection.³⁹

Renan's potent blend of modern scholarship with literary "divination and conjecture" contrasted sharply with the dry exegesis of theologians like Strauss. *Life of Jesus* became the first radical biography of Jesus to reach a genuinely popular audience, especially in France.⁴⁰ By the end of 1864, the full edition and its cheaper, popular abridgment had together sold 168,000 copies—more than Émile Zola's accessibly priced novels sold in the more literate market of the 1880s. The book transformed Renan into an international celebrity, and he earned more from the first few years of book sales than he might have during an entire career as a professor.⁴¹ The popularity of *Life of Jesus* immediately alarmed Catholic authorities, and they released a torrent of articles, books, and brochures. By June 1864, a librarian in Dijon could compile a bibliography of 214 works responding to Renan's book, almost all of them hostile Catholic pamphlets.⁴² Statistical analyses of the publishing industry show a spike in religious topics in 1863–64.⁴³ Bishops denounced *Life of Jesus* from the pulpit and condemned it at school prize ceremonies.⁴⁴ In 1867, Renan was among the authors who provoked a riot in Saint-Étienne when their books appeared on the shelves of the public library.⁴⁵

olutionary roots of this distinction, see Suzanne Desan, *Reclaiming the Sacred: Lay Religion and Popular Politics in Revolutionary France* (London, 1990), 197–214; and Ford, *Divided Houses*, 18–35.

³⁹ Renan, *OC*, 4:365.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 81.

⁴¹ *L'Assommoir*, for example, was considered a remarkable success; but it took five years (1877–82) to sell 100,000 copies, a feat Renan's book achieved within a year; see Robert F. Byrnes, "The French Publishing Industry and Its Crisis in the 1890's," *Journal of Modern History* 23 (1951): 234. Renan's sales figures are from Jean-Yves Mollier, *Michel & Calmann Lévy, ou la naissance de l'édition moderne 1836–1891* (Paris, 1984), 323. For Renan's personal earnings, see the appendix to Jean-Yves Mollier, ed., *Lettres inédites de Ernest Renan à ses éditeurs Michel et Calmann Lévy* (Paris, 1994).

⁴² Philibert Milsand, *Bibliographie des publications relatives au livre de M. Renan "Vie de Jésus" (de Juillet 1863 à Juin 1864)* (Paris, 1864).

⁴³ Claude Savart, *Les Catholiques en France au XIX^e siècle: Le Témoignage du livre religieux* (Paris, 1985), 111, table 8; 118–19, table 10. Summaries of many pamphlets are available in Vytas V. Gaigalas, *Ernest Renan and his French Catholic Critics* (North Quincy, MA, 1972).

⁴⁴ *Siècle*, August 21, 1863.

⁴⁵ Roger Bellet, "Une bataille culturelle, provincial et nationale, à propos des bons auteurs pour bibliothèques populaires (janvier–juin 1867)," *Revue des sciences humaines* 34 (1969): 453–73.

The Vatican's response was unambiguous: Pius IX placed *Life of Jesus* on the Index of Prohibited Books on August 24, 1863, and, in 1864, unequivocally denounced all rationalist approaches to the Bible in the notorious *Syllabus of Errors*.⁴⁶ Prominent clergy echoed this intransigent rhetoric when they commanded the faithful "neither to read, possess, borrow nor propagate this work."⁴⁷ But not all pamphleteers shared the pope's belief in the incompatibility between faith and scholarly investigation. Many tended instead to exemplify what Christoph Theobald has called *concordisme*: the tireless search for accord between modern science and scriptural truth.⁴⁸ Charles-Émile Freppel, whose *Critical Examination of M. Renan's Life of Jesus* (*Examen critique de la Vie de Jésus de M. Renan*) went through at least fifteen editions, used the words *science* or *scientifique* fifteen times in the short introduction to his book—more than in Renan's book and Ernest Havet's celebrated defense of it combined. A Breton of humble origins who had risen to become a notable professor of theology and favorite of Napoleon III, Freppel argued that Renan's a priori dismissal of the supernatural was incompatible with his claims of scientific disinterest.⁴⁹ Alphonse Gratry and Guillaume Meignan, two esteemed Sorbonne theologians who had uncharacteristic familiarity with non-Catholic scholarship, forcefully reiterated Freppel's claim that *Life of Jesus* was an embarrassing representation of "French science" abroad.⁵⁰ They went so far as to praise Heinrich Ewald, a German Protestant theologian whom Renan listed among his models, arguing that he had provided a historical account of Christ's life that was at once more scholarly and more devout than *Life of Jesus*.⁵¹

⁴⁶ Jesus Martinez de Bujanda and Marcella Richter, eds., *Index librorum prohibitorum, 1600–1966* (Sherbrooke, 2002), 757; Christopher Clark, "The New Catholicism and the European Culture Wars," in Clark and Kaiser, *Culture Wars*, 38–39.

⁴⁷ Claude-Henri-Augustin Plantier, *Instruction pastorale de Mgr. l'évêque de Nîmes au clergé de son diocèse contre un ouvrage intitulé Vie de Jésus par Ernest Renan: La dédicace, les principes, les sources* (Paris, 1863), 133.

⁴⁸ Christoph Theobald, "L'exégèse catholique au moment de la crise moderniste," in *Le monde contemporain et la Bible*, ed. Claude Savart and Jean-Noël Aletti (Paris, 1985), 395.

⁴⁹ Charles-Émile Freppel, *Examen critique de la Vie de Jésus de M. Renan*, 15th ed. (1863; Paris, 1866). On Freppel, see Bernard Plongeron, ed., *Catholiques entre monarchie et république: Monseigneur Freppel et son temps: 1792–1892–1992*, Actes du Colloque national de l'Université catholique de l'Ouest, Angers, 23–25 septembre 1992 (Paris, 1995).

⁵⁰ Freppel, *Examen critique*, 3.

⁵¹ Alphonse Gratry, *Jésus-Christ: Réponse à M. Renan* (Paris, 1864), esp. the second part; Guillaume Meignan, *M. Renan réfuté par les rationalistes allemands* (Paris, 1863), 20–33. Ewald was a German Orientalist from Göttingen, whom Renan saw as a more direct precursor of his own work than Strauss. See Georg Heinrich Ewald, *Geschichte des Volkes Israel*, 3rd ed., 8 vols. (Göttingen, 1864–68); the volume on Christ (*Geschichte Christus' und seiner Zeit*) originally appeared in 1855.

Important clerics were not the only voices to join the print debate. By late 1863, one publisher's price list offered pamphlets by two bishops, two abbots, various parish priests, a Jesuit, an Ultramontane populist, a liberal Catholic historian, an anonymous musical composer, and a pseudonymous layman.⁵² The enormously famous Ultramontane journalist Louis Veuillot agonized for months about how to respond, confessing at one point that he felt like throwing his pens and papers out the window.⁵³ "So many pamphlets!" he exclaimed in August 1863, "and yet not one that does what I would like it to."⁵⁴ Since the 1840s, Veuillot's newspaper *L'Univers* had pioneered an ironic style of attacking conservative journalism that was enormously popular among lower clergy and laymen.⁵⁵ While the newspaper was temporarily suspended at the time of *Life of Jesus's* release, many lay pamphleteers sought to sustain its combative and satirical legacy. They abandoned the clergy's heavily referenced attacks for a plethora of alternative formats. In addition to many responses in verse, there were fictive dialogues, spoof newspaper advertisements, and even an *Apocryphal Correspondence* (*Correspondance apocryphe*) between Renan and his sister "Ursule" in which the latter implored him to come to his senses and return to his Breton Catholic roots.⁵⁶ One of the most popular pamphlets was written by Henri Lasserre, a conservative journalist whose dedication to Catholicism had dramatically intensified after a pilgrimage to Lourdes in 1862, when he received an apparently miraculous cure of his progressive blindness.⁵⁷ His *Gospel according to Renan* (*L'Évangile selon Renan*) blasted the author with every insult imaginable—these included comparisons to Judas, innuendoes about the literary muse Louise Colet, and antisemitic jibes about Renan's publisher—all delivered in a rambunctious tone that sought to discredit Renan and belittle his scholarly authority.⁵⁸

⁵² From the back page of Anonymous, *De la philosophie pour deux sous, à propos du livre de M.—Chose* (Paris, 1863).

⁵³ Louis Veuillot to Charlotte de Grammont, August 4, 1863, in Louis Veuillot, *Œuvres complètes: Deuxième série; Correspondance*, 12 vols. (Paris, 1931), 6:391.

⁵⁴ Louis Veuillot to Dom Guéranger, August 12, 1863 (*ibid.*, 7:396). Veuillot had originally drafted a satirical poem that contained many typically *veuillotiste* features but decided against publishing it; see Louis Veuillot, "Le Rat," in *Œuvres complètes: Première série; Œuvres diverses*, 14 vols. (Paris, 1924–38), 14:157–69.

⁵⁵ Austin Gough, *Paris and Rome: The Gallican Church and the Ultramontane Campaign* (Oxford, 1986), 85–97; James F. McMillan, "Rediscovering Louis Veuillot: The Politics of Religious Identity in Nineteenth-Century France," in *Visions/Revisions: Essays on Nineteenth-Century French Culture*, ed. Nigel Harkness, Paul Rowe, Tim Unwin, and Jennifer Yee (Oxford, 2003), 312–13.

⁵⁶ Anonymous, *Correspondance apocryphe entre M. E. Renan et sa sœur Ursule, à propos de l'ouvrage intitulé la Vie de Jésus* (Paris, 1863).

⁵⁷ See Harris, *Lourdes*, 179–80.

⁵⁸ Henri Lasserre, *L'Évangile selon Renan*, 12th ed. (Paris, 1863), 44, 12, 13. Louise Colet was known for her adultery with Gustave Flaubert, but she was also a poet and writer in her own right. Renan's publishers, the Lévy brothers, were occasionally even targets of

The formal diversity of pamphlets reflected Catholics' uncertainty about the most effective way to combat the threat of *Life of Jesus*. Form mattered to Catholic pamphleteers because they perceived Renan's style as central to his success and thus to the urgency of their mission. Countless pamphlets labeled Renan a novelist and disparaged his book accordingly.⁵⁹ "Is it a historical novel?" asked Gratry. "No, it is a nonhistorical novel."⁶⁰ This charge simultaneously attacked Renan's scholarly credibility and evoked a discourse on novel reading as feminine and corruptive. Drawing on the ideas of Joseph de Maistre and others, Catholic writers throughout the nineteenth century had portrayed women as specifically vulnerable to the passion and drama of emotive writing and had constructed the idea of the *mauvais livre* as a central enemy to the maintenance of religious faith.⁶¹ But the accusation of novelization also represented profound insecurity about Renan's ability to reach a mass audience, and especially about the competition this represented to clerics' own efforts to win ordinary men and women for the church. It is no accident that in the years following *Life of Jesus*, prominent Catholics as dissimilar as the ultraconservative Veuillot and the liberal Félix Dupanloup produced their own narrative lives of Jesus.⁶² As late as 1887, Lasserre acknowledged that his vernacular translation of the Gospel was intended to fight *Life of Jesus* on its own accessible terrain.⁶³

Liberal respondents generally entered the debate with foggier opinions than Renan's devout opponents. Few defended Renan as unambiguously as Ernest Havet, a freethinking Parisian academic whose review in the prestigious *Revue des Deux Mondes* celebrated *Life of Jesus* as a triumph of scientific principles over superstition.⁶⁴ Clerics naturally saw Havet's article as evidence of the aca-

antisemitic abuse from their own authors; see Willa Z. Silverman, *The Notorious Life of Gyp: Right-Wing Anarchist in Fin-de-Siècle France* (New York, 1995).

⁵⁹ Louis-Antoine-Augustin Pavy, *A chacun selon ses œuvres!!! Observations de Mgr l'Évêque d'Alger sur le roman intitulé Vie de Jésus par M. Ernest Renan*, 3rd ed. (Paris, 1863), 29; Comte Charles-Forbes-René de Montalembert, *L'Église libre dans l'état libre: Discours prononcés au Congrès catholique de Malines* (Paris, 1863), 168; Frédéric des Granges, *Une Échappée sur la Vie de Jésus d'Ernest Renan* (Paris, 1863), 16.

⁶⁰ Gratry, *Jésus-Christ*, 55.

⁶¹ Lyons, *Readers and Society*, 82–86, 92–95. Seminal works include Félix Dupanloup, *Avertissement à la jeunesse et aux pères de famille: Sur les attaques dirigées contre la religion par quelques écrivains de nos jours* (Paris, 1863), and *Femmes savantes et femmes studieuses* (Paris, 1867); also Adrien Sylvain, *Le Livre de la jeune fille en vacances* (Avignon, 1872), 48; Jean Baptiste Boone, *Les mauvais livres, les mauvais journaux et les romans*, 3rd ed. (Brussels, 1842).

⁶² Louis Veuillot, *La Vie de Notre-Seigneur Jésus-Christ* (Paris, 1864); Félix Dupanloup, *Histoire de Notre-Seigneur Jésus-Christ* (Paris, 1870).

⁶³ Henri Lasserre, *Les Saints Évangiles: Traduction nouvelle* (Paris, 1887), xxv.

⁶⁴ Ernest Havet, *Jésus dans l'histoire: Examen de la Vie de Jésus par M. Renan* (Paris, 1863), 8, 21, 26; this originally appeared as "L'Évangile et l'histoire," *Revue des Deux Mondes* 46 (August 1863): 564–96.

demic elite's godless rationalism.⁶⁵ In fact, more typical of the book's reception in the liberal press was the response by the literary critic Charles-Augustin de Sainte-Beuve, a lion of Second Empire polite society. Writing in the *Constitutionnel*, Sainte-Beuve noted that the book had appeared to dissatisfy devout believers, radical freethinkers, and liberal politicians simultaneously. He declared that Renan's "originality" was precisely "to have dared to put himself above [such criticisms] and take a position beyond them."⁶⁶ Renan, a mixture of "artist and chemist," had created a work that did not destroy the Gospels, but breathed new life into them.⁶⁷ While Sainte-Beuve agreed with Havet that those who did and did not believe in the supernatural could never truly agree, he argued that there was "a considerable, indecisive, floating mass of minds" between the devout and the disbelieving.⁶⁸ Such minds preferred to ignore the uncertainty of religious questions in pursuit of happiness and worldly fulfillment. This mass, to Sainte-Beuve, represented the true "disposition of the nineteenth century, of this century which, I repeat, is neither believing nor disbelieving, neither Maistre nor Voltaire."⁶⁹ Because Renan wrote for this mass, he was "the philosophical champion best suited to this second half of the nineteenth century."⁷⁰

Following Sainte-Beuve, Mollier has attributed Renan's success to those "rationalist and liberal circles" where outright atheism was unusual.⁷¹ Certainly, most liberal politicians and writers agreed that Renan's right to free inquiry and expression must be defended against the incursions of the clerical right. When Cardinal Henri de Bonnechose tried to ban irreligious books like Renan's through action in the senate in March 1864, even Catholic Bonapartists like Prosper de Mérimée were outraged, and the effort soon collapsed.⁷² But it would be wrong to think *Life of Jesus* the toast of France's cultural elite. While many liberal writers agreed that Renan's book should be judged by the degree to which it successfully reconciled faith and reason, privately they were often unconvinced

⁶⁵ They added supplements to their pamphlets: Charles-Émile Freppel, *Examen critique de la "Vie de Jésus" de M. Renan*, 6th ed. (Paris, 1863); Mgr l'Evêque de Montauban, *Lettre pastorale de Mgr l'Evêque de Montauban sur la Vie de Jésus selon M. Renan et sur les principes philosophiques de M. Havet* (Montauban, 1863).

⁶⁶ Charles-Augustin de Sainte-Beuve, "Vie de Jésus, par M. E. Renan," in *Nouveaux Lundis*, 13 vols. (Paris, 1879–95), 6:9; this originally appeared in the *Constitutionnel*, September 7, 1863.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 19, 17.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁷¹ Mollier, "La réception idéologique," 111.

⁷² The main speeches are redacted in a supplement to the *Journal des Débats*, March 21, 1864; see also Mgr Besson, *Vie du cardinal Bonnechose, archevêque de Rouen*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1887), 2:11–17; Prosper Mérimée to Victor Cousin, March 20, 1864, in Prosper Mérimée, *Correspondance générale*, 17 vols. (Toulouse, 1941–64), 16:87.

by the attempt. Émile Ollivier, a politician and writer who championed the “liberal” empire and shared Sainte-Beuve’s conviction that the nineteenth century represented intellectual and spiritual synthesis, thought Renan’s book “too much for the believer, too little for the man of reason.”⁷³ Gustave Flaubert voiced similar concerns.⁷⁴ The most wounding response in this regard was George Sand’s letter to the Emperor’s reformist cousin Prince Napoleon, which the latter copied and sent to Renan, a fervent admirer of the novelist.⁷⁵ Sand celebrated *Life of Jesus* for confirming her gut feelings about the humanity of Christ, but she felt Renan’s “overly seductive” language and “insufficiently precise” reasoning had led him to fail at his mission.⁷⁶ Thankfully for Renan, the book’s cool reception among his peers did not hinder its potential to generate popular curiosity.

WRITING TO RENAN

The practice of ordinary people writing to Renan is an index of the prominence of his public image in this period.⁷⁷ Alongside his many friends and acquaintances, approximately three hundred “unknown” lay correspondents and ninety-four priests sent letters to Renan in his lifetime. This correspondence represents an exceptional public response to a nineteenth-century author: the number of unacquainted correspondents is, for example, significantly larger than for any of the popular writers examined by James Smith Allen.⁷⁸ The phenomenon first began after Renan’s inaugural lecture at the Collège de France in 1862, then exploded after the appearance of *Life of Jesus*. A final burst of letters greeted the publication of his *Souvenirs d’enfance et de jeunesse* (*Recollections of Childhood and Youth*) in the 1880s. Nearly all the letters dealt with questions of religion and the interpretation of the Bible, and the majority responded to *Life of Jesus*. No scholar has analyzed these letters since 1937, when Renan’s granddaughter Henriette Psichari made an intelligent but unsystematic exploration into the family archives.⁷⁹ None of the letters gives any reason to suggest that there was a re-

⁷³ Émile Ollivier, *Journal 1846–1869*, ed. Theodore Zeldin and Anne Troisier de Diaz, 2 vols. (Paris, 1961), 2:90. Liberal politician Eugène Pelletan voiced similar sentiments in *Nouvelles heures de travail* (Paris, 1870), 249–73.

⁷⁴ Gustave Flaubert to Mademoiselle Leroyer de Chantepie, October 23, 1863, in Gustave Flaubert, *Correspondance*, ed. Jean Bruneau, 6 vols. (Paris, 1984–2007), 3:352.

⁷⁵ Ernest d’Hauterive, ed., *The Second Empire and Its Downfall: The Correspondence of the Emperor Napoleon III and His Cousin Prince Napoleon*, trans. Herbert Wilson (London, 1927), 229.

⁷⁶ George Sand to Prince Napoléon, November 19, 1863, in George Sand, *Correspondance*, ed. Georges Lubin, 26 vols. (Paris, 1964–95), 18:123–25.

⁷⁷ Another index is his autograph, which was the third most expensive in France after Adolphe Thiers’s and Napoleon III’s. See the list in *Monde illustré*, September 5, 1863.

⁷⁸ Allen, *In the Public Eye*, 70–82 and tables A.8–14.

⁷⁹ Henriette Psichari, *Renan d’après lui-même* (Paris, 1937).

gionally or nationally coordinated letter-writing campaign. A third of the letter writers gave no indication of their geographical origin, which is the same proportion as those whose gender cannot be positively established. Of those that did leave such information, around a fifth came from abroad, while two-fifths of the French letters came from Paris and its environs. The remaining letters came from towns and villages across France, though Renan's home region of Brittany was especially heavily represented.

Taken as a whole, this body of letters represents an enormous diversity. In an evocative passage, Psichari imagined her grandfather confronted each morning with a "postbag [that] revealed the depths of humanity," with the occasional poignant, confessional letter "breaking away from the massed envelopes," their authors "flaunting their pitiful bundles of secrets and doubts."⁸⁰ In the absence of firm conventions and, in the case of angry Catholics, of deference, correspondents addressed Renan in whatever form and with whichever information they felt appropriate. Admirers' letters tended to be the most conventional. They could arrive on anything from monogrammed notepaper to cheap scraps, and though the quality of language varied fairly widely, they were usually written in carefully composed prose and properly signed. Such overt signs of investment invited Renan to read them carefully. Enemies of the book encompassed more variety. They sent its author sardonic poetry in one verse or across several pages, short notes attacking his motives, and long screeds that bombarded him with a seemingly endless supply of insults. Some enhanced their letters with pasted pictures of Jesus on the cross or Satan burning a sinner with the fire from his eyes, while others enclosed the mass-produced prayer cards known as *images de piété*.⁸¹ Others did not send letters at all, but rather a calling card that read simply "Judas Iscariot" or an unsigned telegram that declared "God exists."⁸² One mysterious writer sent anonymous notes warning that "There is a hell," while another wrote each Good Shepherd Sunday to urge Renan's return to the flock.⁸³ Whether compassionate or abusive, Catholic correspondents were also more inclined to employ anonymity or pseudonyms than were Renan's fans; his only satisfying response would have been retraction and conversion, and they neither expected nor desired a letter in return.⁸⁴

We cannot be certain whether or not Renan replied to any of the letters he received from unknown correspondents, though the absence of continuing chains

⁸⁰ Ibid., iii.

⁸¹ Anonymous to Ernest Renan, April 17, 1889, CSR, Ms24.46; Anonymous to Ernest Renan, n.d., CSR, Ms24.91. For *images de piété*, see CSR, Ms24.23–25, Ms24.26–28, Ms24.43, Ms24.50, Ms24.53 and Ms24.66.

⁸² Anonymous to Ernest Renan, 1892, CSR, Ms24.52; Anonymous to Ernest Renan, January 29, 1891, CSR, Ms24.49.

⁸³ CSR, Ms24.29–35, Ms24.38–39.

⁸⁴ For pseudonyms, see CSR, Ms24.12, Ms24.13, Ms24.71, Ms24.77, Ms24.79.

of letters suggests he did not.⁸⁵ We can assume that he applied the same principle of abstention to his private critics as to his public ones. As Renan put it to Sainte-Beuve, he did not consider himself a polemicist and saw no point in arguing against “preconceptions.”⁸⁶ He was nonetheless clearly rankled by the lies and inventions of the conservative press, which were repeated in dozens of hostile letters. In one of his last works, he even feared that the rumors and apocryphal texts that appeared in this period would tarnish his image for generations.⁸⁷ By October, the Goncourt brothers, whom he met at the famous “Magny dinners” of midcentury notables, reported that he looked “hurt, extinguished” and “weighed-down” by the regular torrent of abuse.⁸⁸ But he remained steadfast, quipping in the 1867 preface to the new edition of *Life of Jesus* that if it eased the souls of pious critics to believe him to be “ignorant, deceitful, or a man of bad faith,” he would not be so pitiless as to “disenchant” them.⁸⁹

FORMS OF FANDOM

To understand the world of Renan’s correspondents, we need to put aside some of our dominant images of mid-nineteenth-century France. Many historians and critics have depicted Paris in the Second Empire as a vibrant and conflicted metropolis at the forefront of European cultural dynamism and modernity, an interpretation that partly derives from the period’s radical literary production—for example, the scandals surrounding *Fleurs du Mal* and *Madame Bovary* (both published as books in 1857).⁹⁰ Outside the capital, improved literacy, cheaper editions, and faster networks of distribution, especially along railways, have all led historians of the book to herald a “golden age” of popular reading after

⁸⁵ A rare exception is his exchange with Annette Boste in the late 1870s: CSR, Ms37.110–11.

⁸⁶ Ernest Renan to Charles-Augustin de Sainte-Beuve, September 10, 1863, in Charles-Augustin de Sainte-Beuve, *Correspondance générale*, ed. Jean Bonnerot, 19 vols. (Paris, 1925–83), 13:390–91.

⁸⁷ Ernest Renan, *Feuilles détachées*, in *OC*, 2:946–49.

⁸⁸ Edmond and Jules de Goncourt, *Journal: Mémoires de la vie littéraire*, ed. Robert Ricatte, 22 vols. (Monaco, 1956–58), 6:133. For the Magny dinners, see “Les ‘Dîners Magny,’” in Sainte-Beuve, *Correspondance générale*, 13:685–87; and the useful consideration by Jonathan Dewald, *Lost Worlds: The Emergence of French Social History, 1815–1970* (University Park, PA, 2006), chap. 1.

⁸⁹ Renan, *OC*, 4:14.

⁹⁰ Representative works include David Harvey, *Paris: Capital of Modernity* (New York, 2003); and Christopher Prendergast, *Paris and the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford, 1995). Such work draws on Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (London, 1999), particularly the two versions of the essay “Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century,” one of which had appeared in earlier English translation.

1860.⁹¹ But for many of Renan's admirers, obtaining and reading *Life of Jesus* was a difficult enterprise. While Parisians could cram into Michel Lévy's fashionable Librairie Nouvelle on the Boulevard des Italiens (alongside disguised priests, if family legend is to be believed), rural readers faced challenges that would be unfamiliar to the city's intelligentsia.⁹² As Martyn Lyons argues, "the peasantry was only partly integrated into the nineteenth-century reading public."⁹³ Although generally literate, they read many fewer newspapers and owned fewer books than their urban counterparts. They were predominantly dependent on passing colporteurs for cheap books, though if they were lucky there would be a bookshop, library, or reading room in the nearest large town.⁹⁴ But despite the continuing growth in such accessible venues, they were far from universal, and during the Second Empire they were critically vulnerable to political interference.⁹⁵

Other institutional impediments, from mayors to priests and mothers superior, populate readers' letters to Renan. Local clergy followed the Vatican's lead by attempting to prohibit the reading of the book. One priest wrote to Renan declaring that he had pried his own copy from the hands of a shocked parishioner; we never find out how the latter felt about this.⁹⁶ In the heavily politicized educational context of the 1880s, high school students in Reims and schoolteachers in the Alps reported to Renan how chaplains and bishops tried to denigrate and confiscate the book.⁹⁷

⁹¹ Noë Richter, *La lecture et ses institutions: La lecture populaire, 1700–1918* (Maine, 1987), 201–54; the definitive general work remains Roger Chartier and Henri-Jean Martin, eds., *Le Temps des éditeurs: Du romantisme à la Belle époque*, vol. 3 of *Histoire de l'édition française* (Paris, 1985).

⁹² Mollier, *Michel et Calmann Lévy*, 324; for a woodcut of the crowds at Lévy's shop, see Chartier and Martin, *Temps des éditeurs*, 237.

⁹³ Martyn Lyons, "New Readers in the Nineteenth Century: Women, Children, Workers," in *A History of Reading in the West*, ed. Guglielmo Cavallo and Roger Chartier (Cambridge, 1999), 342.

⁹⁴ For the colportage repertoire, see Klaus-Peter Walter, "Littérature de colportage et roman-feuilleton: Quelques remarques sur la transformation du circuit littéraire à grande diffusion en France entre 1840 et 1870," in *Colportage et lecture populaire: Imprimés de large circulation en Europe, XVIe–XIXe siècles*, ed. Roger Chartier and Hans-Jürgen Lüsebrink (Paris, 1996), 151–64.

⁹⁵ An invaluable summary of the material conditions of book distribution, including maps, is Frédéric Barbier, "Libraires et colporteurs," in Chartier and Martin, *Temps des éditeurs*, 229–59. Noë Richter is the preeminent historian of French libraries, see his *Les bibliothèques populaires* (Paris, 1978) and subsequent works; for the Second Empire, see Graham Keith Barnett, *Histoire des bibliothèques publiques en France de la Révolution à 1939*, trans. Thierry Lefèvre and Yves Sardat (Paris, 1987), chap. 4.

⁹⁶ Abbé Lambert to Ernest Renan, March 27, 1864, CSR, Ms22.26.

⁹⁷ L. H. Brégi to Ernest Renan, July 23, 1881, CSR, Ms37.120; A. Jacob to Ernest Renan, February 8, 1889, CSR, Ms24.112.

The other obstacle was economic. The first, standard edition of the book formed part of a series of octavo editions that Renan's publisher, Michel Lévy, had hoped would appeal to a middle-class market.⁹⁸ At 7 francs 50, they were relatively expensive. Provincial admirers urged Renan to release a cheaper run, which he eventually did in March 1864 with *Jesus (Jésus)*, a stripped-down edition priced at just 1 franc 25 and targeted at a new and wider audience.⁹⁹ The print worker Sercie de Villiers reminded him that "reading is like moonlight in the provinces," and the success of small, "so-called *religious* books" testified to the possibilities of a compact publication. A Parisian who wrote on behalf of a poor friend in Reims asked for a popular edition as "a favor to the disinherited of the world."¹⁰⁰ Alas, when Renan did publish the abridged version, the government denied it a colportage license.¹⁰¹ Rural readers would have to look beyond the travelling salesmen if they wished to read *Life of Jesus*.

News of the book certainly reached this frustrated potential audience. They found out about it through acquaintances and occasionally newspapers, but most often (and most ironically) from the very pamphlets and sermons that decried it as heresy. The biographer Pons recalled arriving back in the Midi from Paris around 1863: "I was surprised to hear the porter, as he took my baggage, welcoming me by asking this question in the local patois: 'So, what are they saying about M. Renan?'" The bishop of Marseille had apparently piqued local curiosity by ringing the church bells each Friday in protest against *Life of Jesus*.¹⁰² A correspondent from the Midi seemed to confirm this interpretation when he wrote to Renan in February 1864 that "everyone here wants to read your book thanks to the priest's furious preaching."¹⁰³

Even before the release of the cheap *Jésus*, some villagers found the means to get copies of the original version. In December 1863, a rural friend of Edgar Quinet's wrote to testify that the book had "penetrated as far as our countryside," emphasizing that the book had even found an audience among the barely literate.¹⁰⁴ He noted that, among other examples, "in a *commune* not far from

⁹⁸ Mollier, *Michel et Calmann Lévy*, 320.

⁹⁹ A comprehensive description of the textual differences between the editions can be found in Georges Pholien, *Les Deux "Vie de Jésus" de Renan* (Paris, 1983).

¹⁰⁰ A. Sercie de Villiers to Ernest Renan, July 27, 1863, CSR, Ms37.23; R. Hérié to Ernest Renan, August 19, 1863, CSR, Ms37.27.

¹⁰¹ Mollier, *Michel et Calmann Lévy*, 325. Unfortunately the relevant records and reports for the colportage request are missing from the F/18 series at the Archives Nationales.

¹⁰² Antoine-Joseph Pons, *Ernest Renan et les origines du christianisme* (Paris, 1881), 101.

¹⁰³ Albert Deloge to Ernest Renan, February 18, 1864, CSR, Ms37.53.

¹⁰⁴ Alphonse Chabal to Edgar Quinet, December 27, 1863, BnF, NAF 20783, fols. 86–90.

Bourg, a few men got together and chipped in to buy [*Life of Jesus*]" before reading it together. But in the absence of such schemes, people borrowed the book from libraries and friends or read it in *cabinets de lecture*. A remarkable proportion of the correspondents who wrote to Renan in celebration of his book acquired it this way. Their borrowing could express poverty, isolation, or simply a culture of reading that revolved around lending institutions, but it always revealed their fervent desire to get their hands on an object that shimmered with controversy and danger. The prevalence of this method of obtaining the book is also a constant reminder that the audience for Renan's book exceeded that indicated by its impressive sales figures.

Temporary possession gave reading a special intensity. It began with anticipation: Louise Lacuria, a disaffected nun, recalled the "mad desire to read the *Life of Jesus*" that possessed her in the convent.¹⁰⁵ Then there was concentration: Sercie de Villiers, the aforementioned print worker, wrote that "a friendly person lent me your noble and beautiful book for a day and a night. I read it without resting."¹⁰⁶ It was "under this hot impression" that he was inspired to write to the author. The effect was even stronger for readers in religious institutions, for whom lending was smuggling. Like the nun Lacuria, Félix Trébois, a teaching abbot in an ecclesiastical house, procured *Life of Jesus* via an intermediary.¹⁰⁷ Both boasted of eluding the pervasive surveillance of their superiors and reported a transformative engagement with the book that they narrated to its author.

The bitterness that cloistered correspondents felt toward church life sometimes transformed them into virulent anticlericals. The abbot Trébois, for example, narrated his clandestine reading of *Life of Jesus* as the cause of a profound cleavage: "my religious beliefs changed completely." His anger at Catholicism's apparent deceit left him ashamed to have ever worn the habit and he deserted religious life for a precarious new career as a budding litterateur in Paris.¹⁰⁸ Though apparently unsuccessful, Trébois returned to print with a vengeance in the 1870s, founding an organization for republican propaganda.¹⁰⁹ Its interpretation of society centered on reading: though republicans acted in the interest of the majority, Trébois argued, the monarchist minority was able to manipulate the population through its control of printed information and its alliance with the church. The solution was to support the creation of a "democratic bookshop," fund popular

¹⁰⁵ Louise Lacuria to Ernest Renan, January 22, 1881, CSR, Ms37.117.

¹⁰⁶ A. Sercie de Villiers to Ernest Renan, July 27, 1863, CSR, Ms37.23.

¹⁰⁷ Félix Trébois to Ernest Renan, September 28, 1865, CSR, Ms22.28; Louise Lacuria to Ernest Renan, January 22, 1881, CSR, Ms37.117.

¹⁰⁸ Félix Trébois to Ernest Renan, September 28, 1865, CSR, Ms22.28. He then wrote a long and formulaic anticlerical novel, *La Conscience de Monsieur Coco* (Paris, 1865).

¹⁰⁹ Félix Trébois, *La Propagande républicaine* (Paris, 1871).

libraries, and establish republican reading circles.¹¹⁰ It is easy to imagine that Trébois's personal experience of the transformative potential of liberated reading, through *Life of Jesus*, helped determine the literary bent of his political activism.

Unlike Trébois, other readers believed that Renan represented true religion rather than irreligion. They declared that "even if I am attached to doctrines which you do not perhaps recognize, I am no less one of your admirers, and I profess for Christ the same admiration that you profess yourself."¹¹¹ Even those who had problems with Renan's book felt it important to acknowledge his religiosity, placing him among "the very small number of [true] Christians" or suggesting in confidence that the author was "religious in the broadest sense of the term."¹¹²

Female readers, in particular, often articulated reconciliatory views. Camille Bias had suffered a cloistered upbringing, and her books sought to highlight "the dangers and factious results of this education, so sought-after for girls." Her opinions of *Life of Jesus* were, however, much less hostile to the concept of religion than Trébois's: "This work, worthy of a great character and a great talent, was what I wished for; for if my ignorance prevented me from making certain researches, I had in some way sensed the great truths which you have reestablished. So thank you for having restored Jesus of Nazareth to a throne worthy of him; you have torn off the veil in which absolutism shrouded this great figure to hide him from the ignorant, simple and timid."¹¹³ Other women agreed with this contrast between superfluous Catholicism and the purity of Jesus's conception. After reading the book over three emotional days, one wrote to Renan that "ever since I have been the free arbiter of my thought I have dreamt of a pure religion, free from the lies and falsehoods that have been added to it."¹¹⁴ In perhaps the most striking testimony of all, an unhappily married young mother in Lyon described how *Life of Jesus* had provided relief from a life of misery and hatred where she had felt abandoned by God and condemned to a miserable death. To her, *Life of Jesus* meant consolation. "I have attended more than one sermon," she wrote, "I have read plenty of pious books, all of which did nothing for me. The first book of the *Imitation of Christ* did me good, but did not at all heal my soul, infested with hatred."¹¹⁵ In short, Renan's book seems to have succeeded where Christianity had failed: it restored her faith in the figure of Christ.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 4.

¹¹¹ Devillaine to Ernest Renan, February 5, 1864, CSR, Ms37.51.

¹¹² Lazare Augé to Ernest Renan, May 5, 1866, CSR, Ms24.94; Deloge to Renan, February 18, 1864, CSR, Ms37.53.

¹¹³ Camille Bias to Ernest Renan, n.d., CSR, Ms37.45.

¹¹⁴ A. Verrillaud to Ernest Renan, November 30, 1863, CSR, Ms37.35.

¹¹⁵ Femme Forest to Ernest Renan, September 26, 1867, CSR, Ms37.95.

Such letters suggest that Kselman was right to speculate that *Life of Jesus* fulfilled a contemporary desire for a new Jesus.¹¹⁶ This Jesus was resolutely human; his suffering was transcendental, but it was also an immediate, visceral complement to the woes of dispossessed and disillusioned readers. The act of reading *Life of Jesus* personalized this anguish in a way that some readers found uniquely moving. Though floods of tears and scenes of rapid, engrossed reading were hallmarks of correspondence in the "sentimental" age, this does not necessarily make them any less genuine; sincere epistolary testimony was, after all, part of the same Romantic development.¹¹⁷ We can say with certainty that these correspondents articulated a particular connection between personal suffering, intellectual independence, and reading *Life of Jesus*.

"L'INCONNUE"

While the overwhelming majority of letters to Renan were one-off fan letters, a more protracted series of manuscripts provides a unique opportunity to trace in greater detail a reader's constellation of the themes of reading, gender, and the religiosity of Renan's book. In March 1864, nearly a year after the publication of *Life of Jesus*, a woman in the department of the Yonne read in her newspaper that its author was publishing a popular edition of the book. The newspaper reproduced the edition's preface, in which Renan explained his opposition to the supernatural in simple terms and reiterated his belief that his work would "serve" rather than "undermine" religion. He eulogized the religiosity of "the people," to whom his new book was addressed, contrasting these "true disciples of Jesus" with the manipulative official church. He concluded by promising to restore to ordinary people Jesus's image of a future paradise, based on "deliverance through resignation, work, happiness, mutual support," and, not least, "deliverance through science."¹¹⁸ This woman had already read the full edition of *Life of Jesus*, and she was moved by the author's commitment to spreading its message to a broader audience. But she was disturbed to read in the same newspaper that Renan was considering a run for elected office, in protest of his treatment by the imperial government.¹¹⁹ Her town of Villevallier was over a hundred kilometers from Paris, and she had never met the controversial professor, but she decided that the situation was important enough that she should write to him and warn him away from a political career. On March 5, she thus wrote the author a neat, two-sided letter declaring that, on first reading his book, it seemed that he "ha[d]

¹¹⁶ Kselman, *Miracles and Prophecies*, 96–97.

¹¹⁷ Lyon-Caen, *La Lecture et la Vie*, chap. 2; and Grassi, *L'Art de la lettre*, 73–82.

¹¹⁸ Ernest Renan, *Jésus* (Paris, 1864), ii–v, vi, vi–vii, ix–x, xii.

¹¹⁹ He would not in fact stand until 1867, and then unsuccessfully.

in view principally cultivated intelligences”: “Today you turn yourself toward the people, and by an eloquent appeal which will touch everyone’s hearts, you lead the humble to the feast which you have prepared for them.”¹²⁰ She urged him to expend his democratic energies on similar publishing initiatives rather than waste them in political talking shops.

The woman concluded her letter with the date, but did not sign it or leave any contact details. Not knowing Renan’s address, she addressed her envelope to the Bibliothèque Impériale, where Renan had been employed. The packet found its intended target, and the woman followed it with six more letters over the three years up to spring 1867, consisting of seventy-seven sheets and booklets, usually covered in writing on both sides.¹²¹ In recognition of her unparalleled verbosity, she is recorded in the archival catalogue as a proper noun: *l’Inconnue* (the Unknown Woman). Her anonymity was atypical for Renan’s fan mail, and it is difficult to reconstruct many biographical details. By her postmarks, we can deduce that she initially wrote from Villevalier, and later from the Faubourg Saint-Jacques, near Montparnasse in Paris. Her final dispatch was a basket of oranges from her garden, sent to Renan’s wife Cornélie as homage to her husband.¹²²

L’Inconnue used the process of letter writing as a theater for self-expression and self-fashioning; but while carrying this out in the presence of Renan was obviously important to her, apparently his personal input was not. The lengthy treatises she sent him on scholarship and religion were a tantalizing opportunity to define herself by her intelligence and opinions, rather than her gender or social standing, and offered a forum in which to work through and express her religious beliefs. In rare passages hinting at her social life, she appeared frustrated by the absence of such opportunities. For example, she related to Renan that when she had told her friends about the revelation she had experienced through his work, they had condemned her for supporting “a writer who served to destroy religion” and accused her of succumbing to “a fascination with fine phrases.”¹²³

L’Inconnue naturally hoped that Renan would understand her admiration for him better than her friends had. This is not to say that she saw the author as an equal, though she imagined their relationship in increasingly familiar terms. In her first letters, she described it as that between indulgent master and enthusiastic pupil (*maître/écolier*).¹²⁴ Later, their connection became a sort of intellectual patronage, with Renan becoming her “noble and dear benefactor [*bienfaiteur*].”¹²⁵ By her final letter, she envisaged the relationship as one of siblinghood, calling

¹²⁰ L’Inconnue to Ernest Renan, March 5, 1864, CSR, Ms24.1.

¹²¹ L’Inconnue’s letters are filed together as the first subfolder in CSR, Ms24.1–7.

¹²² L’Inconnue to Madame Renan, n.d., CSR, Ms24.1

¹²³ L’Inconnue to Ernest Renan, June 12, 1864, CSR, Ms24.2.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ L’Inconnue to Ernest Renan, August 13, 1865, CSR, Ms24.5.

him "an older brother" and sensing "that a sort of fraternity [*fraternité*] unites us, that the same spirit, albeit in very unequal proportions, enlivens us both with the same breath."¹²⁶ It was no doubt this sense of silent intellectual communion that led her to continue writing despite the lack of a response, or even desire for one. L'Inconnue communicated with Renan's works; new essays, books, and reports in the newspapers provided the rhythm for her writing, punctuating the letters. Like other correspondents who felt they knew Renan from his book, she apparently imagined that she could read his temperament so perfectly through these works that no reciprocal epistolary dialogue was necessary.

On June 12, 1864, l'Inconnue wrote her second letter to Renan, a deeply confessional autobiography that presented her reading of *Life of Jesus* as the central transformative experience in her life: the belated, definitive step away from Catholicism into free thought.¹²⁷ She portrayed herself as the uneasy product of a religious upbringing: "If I always felt very vividly the sublime beauties of the Catholic Religion, the splendor of its rite, all that amounts to the charm of its beliefs, and in particular everything touching on the character of Jesus, on the other hand I avoided, from an early age, an absolute belief in dogmas which appeared to me to harm the ideas of our times."¹²⁸ In particular, like Renan, she was uneasy about the supernatural elements of the official Catholic account. Unable to make the choice between "blindly accepting" Catholicism and refusing it in its entirety, she had lapsed into a period of "indifference and ennui" from which modern biblical criticism revived her.¹²⁹

L'Inconnue came to *Life of Jesus* through her readings of other biblical scholars such as Albert Réville and Edmond Scherer in the *Revue des Deux Mondes*, but her reaction to Renan's book surpassed the detached curiosity with which she had approached previous reading. She does not disclose how she got her hands on *Life of Jesus* or the periodicals she devoured, but she reveals how she had to wait impatiently for well-thumbed copies of the follow-up, *Les Apôtres* (*The Apostles*), to become available at her local library.¹³⁰ Her special attachment to the figure of Jesus led her to feel "a mixture of surprise, admiration and terror" on opening *Life of Jesus*.¹³¹ Driven to read the book four times in eight hours (a claim that, given the book's length, is probably exaggerated for impressive effect), she felt an "anguish" that eventually "reached physical suffering." She described the book's power in terms of total physical possession, comparing it to inhaling a perfume that drew her into an inescapable trance:

¹²⁶ L'Inconnue to Ernest Renan, March 1867, CSR, Ms24.6.

¹²⁷ L'Inconnue to Ernest Renan, June 12, 1864, CSR, Ms24.2.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ L'Inconnue to Ernest Renan, March 1867, CSR, Ms24.6.

¹³¹ L'Inconnue to Ernest Renan, June 12, 1864, CSR, Ms24.2.

I saw him day and night: in his house at Nazareth, his tools in his hand; by the lake, among his disciples; in Jerusalem, under the temple portico; on the cross; in the sepulcher. His name seemed to me to be written everywhere; His voice rang in my ears. . . . The story of the Passion, especially, made me tremble. I could see every detail of the torment, which you described with such frightening realism, more eloquent than any ornament of style. . . . I saw his torn hands, his face stained with sweat and blood, his bruised body; I heard his cries of pain and anguish and I felt my head and my heart fail when I thought of the terrible vertigo of the crucified. . . . I cannot stop myself, sir, from thinking that you saw and heard it all to be able to paint it with such vivid strokes.¹³²

This corporeal language implied that Renan's prose truly and finally communicated the word made flesh and that the reader herself could be transported to the visceral reality of first-century Galilee. The language of painting echoed Renan's own claims that he had revealed "the truth of color" in the biblical story and that this artistic verisimilitude was inseparable from historical truth.¹³³ After reading *Life of Jesus*, l'Inconnue returned to the Gospels, which "seemed to come alive before my eyes." Finally, she "became calm, and from that moment the sublime figure has become ever more present in my heart."¹³⁴

To l'Inconnue, the power of *Life of Jesus* thus lay in its literary resurrection of Jesus and in Renan's apparent access to a higher realm of truth. Her emphasis on the book's consuming evocative power resembled nothing so much as a believer's description of discovering the Bible, or even a religious vision. While claiming to be a convert to close textual criticism and factual accuracy, l'Inconnue never mentioned Renan's specific conclusions, but only his suggestive portrayal of Jesus's life in general and the righteousness of his overall argument about Jesus's place in history. Indeed, l'Inconnue's painstaking discussion of Renan's critics and published respondents gave detailed discussions of their wrong-headedness or bad faith rather than confronting points of historical contention. When she did praise another scholar, Ewald, it was for the beauty of his style, although she eventually dismissed his book for not having the "life" of Renan's.¹³⁵

By emphasizing the importance of Renan's prose to the truthfulness of his account and its centrality to his "high scientific mission," l'Inconnue subscribed to precisely the hybrid conception of historical truth that the author had defined in his introduction to *Life of Jesus*.¹³⁶ Where Renan's enemies in the press had used gendered assumptions about prose style and reading practices to demean his book's scientific value, l'Inconnue forcefully celebrated the importance of Renan's "femininity" in his treatment of religious history. She opposed this "sentimental" trait in his writing to the dry world of abstraction, claiming that it was

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Renan, *OC*, 4:81–82.

¹³⁴ L'Inconnue to Ernest Renan, June 12, 1864, CSR, Ms24.2.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ L'Inconnue to Ernest Renan, June 16, 1864 CSR, Ms24.3.

both faithful to the spirit of Jesus and uniquely powerful in attracting the attention of the masses. On witnessing the spiritual solace and moral teaching that a tiny local chapel in Faubourg Saint-Jacques granted to the poor and weary locals who regularly attended, she could not help but compare the chapel's success in reaching an audience alien to mainstream academic writing:

How many poor women are there, each Sunday morning. . . . Oh! If the great minds accustomed to the most exalted speculations, if these men on whom science, philosophy, and the most refined society lavish their treasures, if they knew how much could be achieved with . . . charity, simple and touching piety in all that which is humble and disregarded in this world! . . . I do not say this for you, sir. . . . I only address it to those strong and virile intelligences [*fortes et viriles intelligences*], to those vigorous minds who are somewhat contemptuous of "feminine weakness" [*la "faiblesse féminine"*], who are too inclined to abstraction, to the metaphysical side of things, and who only want to admit *ideas* into science and the realm of morals without taking account of *feeling* and the natural movements of the human soul.¹³⁷

In drawing this opposition, l'Inconnue absorbed the prevalent gender ideology exhibited in the press, but she appropriated it to make a powerful case for the importance of sentiment to the sciences.

L'Inconnue's understanding of the relationship between gender and scholarship also had consequences for her sense of self. While she emphasized the general importance of "feminine" empathy, she implicitly accepted that it was accessible to male scholars like Renan. She thus chose not to claim access to any specifically female understanding of the subject, and by the same token she discussed abstract matters with an unapologetic self-assurance and facility. On occasion she would even suggest new theories to Renan, such as that Mary Magdalene had been driven by her exalted love for Jesus to move his body and thus make it look like he had been resurrected.¹³⁸ Secular criticism seems to have opened up the possibility of defining herself by her opinions, rather than by any social or gender identity. Through it, she had passed from "childhood faith" to that of "the reflective age."¹³⁹ She did not want to abandon religion itself, only a dogmatic brand of religion that seemed incompatible with the century's spirit of inquiry, and Renan's book provided a bridge between two worldviews—one might even say two identities. The historian's sympathetic and evocative depiction of Jesus allowed this reader to pass into the world of freely exchanged ideas without sacrificing her transcendent personal relationship with the founder of Christianity.

The form of writing in which l'Inconnue engaged when she composed her letters to Renan was, however, a problematic form of liberation. These documents

¹³⁷ L'Inconnue to Ernest Renan, March 1867, CSR, Ms24.6.

¹³⁸ See CSR, Ms24.2 on the resurrection; see also Ms24.3 on educational reform.

¹³⁹ L'Inconnue to Ernest Renan, June 12, 1864, CSR, Ms24.2.

were seemingly boundless theaters for self-expression, where no conventions restricted or denied her from giving voice to her long and detailed arguments. But the fact that she could apparently only do so by writing private letters to an author who lived in a world of institutions and publications from which she was excluded reminds us of the concrete social limits to the emancipation of reading and thinking.¹⁴⁰ Indeed, the anonymity and sheer verbosity of her letters invite us to read this correspondence as a signal of frustration. But l'Inconnue's sustained encounter with both Renan and his texts nonetheless demonstrates the fundamental entanglement between secular reading and religious identity that developed around *Life of Jesus*, while also evoking how individual women could create new configurations of the relationship between gender, writing, and historical truth in order to resolve their personal philosophical and religious struggles.

FORMS OF OPPOSITION

While Renan's admirers generally wrote prose letters in carefully rehearsed handwriting, enemies bombarded the author in a dizzying variety of forms. When his granddaughter Henriette first opened the packets, she was shocked by the extremity of the insults: "as if he who had let individualism into a sacred narrative personally deserved a vengeful assault."¹⁴¹ As Antoine Compagnon has noted in his examination of Ferdinand Brunetière's hate mail, such correspondents "nearly always have a note of delirium."¹⁴² Eloquent letters could abruptly slide into rabid conspiracy theories. In December 1864, for example, an anonymous correspondent who had received *Life of Jesus* due to a bookseller's error wrote to Renan convinced that the mistaken delivery was part of a wider plot against Christianity. After enumerating the animals that Renan was worse than—including owls, lions, sea monsters, and even the last undiscovered animals—he condemned the historian to a painful death.¹⁴³

Despite their fanatical tone, such letters can be instructive. Correspondents' slurs often evoked specific grievances with the author and drew on the ad hominem attacks circulating in print media. Like pamphleteers, they deployed the rhetorical tools that were characteristic of Veuillot's belligerent journalism. Our correspondent's bestial comparisons would not have surprised pamphlet readers: even the dignified theologian Gratry had compared Renan to a fox in the Jardin des Plantes, while others had likened him to the venomous serpent of Genesis.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴⁰ For an eighteenth-century parallel, see Goodman, *Becoming a Woman*, 268.

¹⁴¹ Psichari, *Renan d'après lui-même*, 231.

¹⁴² Compagnon, *Connaissez-vous Brunetière?*, 35.

¹⁴³ Anonymous to Ernest Renan, December 26, 1864, CSR, Ms24.91.

¹⁴⁴ Gratry, *Jésus-Christ*, 85. For serpent comparisons, see (among many others) Augustin Cochin, *Quelques mots sur la Vie de Jésus de M. Ernest Renan* (Paris, 1863), 18;

Letter writers frequently made Renan into Judas: a figure who perfectly embodied the twin vices of apostasy and avarice and who had featured in many Catholic newspapers' attacks.¹⁴⁵ Like Iscariot, Renan had not just betrayed Jesus but had sold him for thirty pieces of silver; he had "prostituted his pen to blasphemy," telling himself, "the more I pique curiosity with my lies, the more I will be read."¹⁴⁶ Some letters fused the Judas comparison with antisemitism, describing Renan's book as "a commercial transaction between a Christian and a Jew."¹⁴⁷ But in the hands of many correspondents, the Judas comparison evoked a more pernicious sin than mere avarice: vanity. One anonymous poet noted that while Judas had simply renounced Jesus for money, Renan also sought "a name."¹⁴⁸ Aside from wealth, it was thus Renan's meretricious pursuit of celebrity that offended many Catholics. They attributed his work to the "two passions" of glory and money, or to the chase for "Satan's celebrity" and "glory . . . that will not help you in this world or the other."¹⁴⁹ From a pious perspective, Renan's apparent vanity contrasted sharply with Christian ideals of rejecting the worldly and embracing humility.

But the most distinctive feature of the body of letters from Renan's opponents is the number of avowedly pious correspondents who rejected the fire, brimstone, and innuendo of the print media and wrote gentle, imploring letters to the author. These letters represent individual commitments to seek his salvation. They exemplify a compassionate side of French Catholicism that was rarely visible in the period's combative journalism and that attempted to redeploy contemporary stereotypes of pious femininity as a weapon against the perceived threat from irreligious literature.

Several features were consistent in such pious and petitioning letters. First, they were almost always written by women—a fact that was either betrayed by the name of the author or raised explicitly in the text. Second, they used self-deprecating language, stressing their humility in the face of a great scholar. They introduced themselves as, for example, "a poor and humble woman," or even "a muse so unknown that it is pointless for her to name herself."¹⁵⁰ Where l'Incon-

Plantier, *Instruction pastorale*, 8; François Bourgade, *Lettre à M. E. Renan à l'occasion de son ouvrage intitulé Vie de Jésus* (Paris, 1864), 2.

¹⁴⁵ See, inter alia, CSR, Ms24, nos. 10, 16, 19, 52, 61, 77; CSR, Ms37, nos. 31, 42, 62; cf. *Figaro*, July 23, 1863; *Foi bretonne*, July 28, 1863; *Gazette de France*, June 26, 1863.

¹⁴⁶ L. M. A. Daudin to Ernest Renan, June 12, 1866, CSR, Ms24.16; Caravallo to Ernest Renan, October 18, 1863, CSR, Ms37.31.

¹⁴⁷ R. Renoz to Ernest Renan, October 1863, CSR, Ms37.33.

¹⁴⁸ Anonymous to Ernest Renan, n.d., CSR, Ms24.61

¹⁴⁹ X to Ernest Renan, n.d., CSR, Ms24.77; Anonymous (signed with a cross) to Ernest Renan, June 29, 1863, CSR, Ms24.68; see also Anonymous to Ernest Renan, n.d., CSR, Ms24.35.

¹⁵⁰ F. Flaction to Ernest Renan, June 28, 1882, CSR, Ms37.126; Anonymous to Ernest Renan, December 1863, CSR, Ms24.13. See also L. Le Roy to Ernest Renan, January 22,

nue rejected any relationship between her gender identity and scholarly argument, pious correspondents emphasized their femininity as a mark of both self-deprecating humility and self-asserting legitimacy. Madame Golinsky, who ran an orphanage in Digne, began her plea to Renan by asserting that “a woman does not condemn . . . her words are soft, plaintive, pleading and sometimes persuasive.” She moved on to represent herself as a protector of popular faith, invoking the fifty orphans for whom she cared “in the name of religion” and asking Renan what would happen if, “led by your writing, and renouncing my beliefs,” she then abandoned them.¹⁵¹ Third, pious women focused on the dangers of rupturing the nation’s relationship with its traditional savior, using their letters to urge Renan to return to Catholicism in the name of his mother, father, sister, and *pays*. A housemaid in Burgundy implored Renan to return to the church “in the name of my country and my faith, which are also yours, and by your mother’s breast,” while a widow in Angers asked him to think of the “pious mother” who must be praying for him.¹⁵² These elements combined to offer Renan an image of France as a Catholic motherland, where the bonds between Christ and the people, legitimated through the church and defended by pious women, guaranteed happiness, order, and salvation. These women could not understand why he was prepared to risk all this for the sake of a scholarly fad that might win over “a materialist and sensualist public.”¹⁵³

Some such correspondents illustrated their point by enclosing *images de piété*—small prayer cards featuring a biblical scene, saint, or other religious image on one side and a prose explanation on the reverse. In the mid-nineteenth century, these images circulated in large numbers through private exchanges, the pilgrimage souvenir industry, and as gifts from religious instructors.¹⁵⁴ Jean Pirotte has suggested that the versatility of these images sustained their success, for though they were mass produced, their owners put them to creative uses. Senders carefully selected and often annotated their images, while being on the receiving end “invited the [image’s] receiver to transform himself into a user,” refining his or her behavior in accordance with the image.¹⁵⁵

1864, CSR, Ms37.49; Anonymous to Ernest Renan, n.d., CSR, Ms24.80; Anonymous to Ernest Renan, August 24, 1863, CSR, Ms37.28.

¹⁵¹ M. Golinsky to Ernest Renan, November 4, 1863, CSR, Ms22.25.

¹⁵² Bonne Sydonie de Gabert to Ernest Renan, n.d., CSR, Ms37.24; Veuve Elinson to Ernest Renan, August 14, 1864, CSR, Ms37.86. Elinson used a father-son analogy to describe Renan’s relationship to Jesus and the church, as did Unsigned (likely Madame Anna Speranza) to Ernest Renan, May 18, 1879, CSR, Ms37.23 and Anonymous to Ernest Renan, n.d., CSR, Ms24.80.

¹⁵³ Anonymous to Ernest Renan, August 28, 1863, CSR, Ms37.28.

¹⁵⁴ See the exhibition catalogue, *Imagiers de paradis: Images de piété populaire du XVe au XXe siècle* (Bastogne, 1990), especially Jean Pirotte’s superb overview, “Les images de dévotion du XVe siècle à nos jours. Introduction à l’étude d’un ‘média,’” 11–78.

¹⁵⁵ Pirotte, “Les images de dévotion,” 71.

We can observe these processes of selection and annotation in the prayer cards received by Renan, which carried the same aim of behavioral transformation. Though senders circulated printed material authored by other hands, they usually annotated or underlined to emphasize what they saw as the cards' key points. Some chose an image of religious "indifference" from Letaille, Saint-Sulpice's best-known printer.¹⁵⁶ *De l'indifférence* exemplified the uncomplicated symbolism that contributed to Letaille's broad popularity. The front of this card depicted a melancholy, androgynous figure surrounded by books, with a caption lamenting the bitterness of a life without "faith, hope or love." Against a backdrop depicting a local church, this figure turns away from his or her books and leans out the window to receive renewed enlightenment from the heavens. The card's verso told the tale of the pictured youth, who had fallen into doubt and disbelief, abandoning happiness in the process. Through a series of statements beginning "if it were true" (e.g., "if it were true that eternity awaited me"), the lost soul realizes the danger of his ways and remembers the happiness of "the beautiful days of my innocence." In other words, this card walked Renan through precisely the conversion process outlined by the prelate's poem, hoping that recollections of his faithful youth at his mother's knee would lead him away from the bitter life of "indifferent" scholarship. Again, correspondents assumed that Renan's abandonment of the seminary had wrenched him from his mother, with one sender specifically underlining the words "pious mother" in the card's narrative.¹⁵⁷ Other correspondents naturally chose to send Renan images of Jesus, usually stressing his capacity for forgiveness.¹⁵⁸

Perhaps the clearest exposition of all these themes came from L. Le Roy, a Parisian Catholic who wrote to Renan at length in elegant script. Identifying herself as a "poor woman," she wrote that she had read *Life of Jesus* and found it to be "full of beautiful things and above all a lively style, I would even dare to say a dangerous one." Le Roy could not understand Renan's inconclusive statements about Jesus, declaring that "either he is the son of God or he is not," and she especially could not understand why he would write such an ambiguous book, injurious to popular faith, when he had nothing with which to replace it. "Before destroying, Sir, one must have the necessary materials for reconstruction." Lamenting his efforts to "trouble consciences," she cited the good works of the clergy, reminding him that he himself owed them part of his education, and even asked him for a reparatory donation to her small village church.¹⁵⁹

Pious women's letters thus offered a critique of *Life of Jesus* that hinged on a combination of personal affirmation and social critique, rather than textual

¹⁵⁶ CSR, Ms24.25 and Ms24.54.

¹⁵⁷ Annotations from CSR, Ms24.25.

¹⁵⁸ CSR, Ms24.25, Ms24.27, Ms24.43 and Ms24.46.

¹⁵⁹ L. Le Roy to Ernest Renan, January 22, 1864, CSR, Ms37.49.

criticism or theological argument. Like the writers of insult letters, they were less concerned with Renan's conclusions than his motives; but unlike them, they felt that he might still be saved from "our skeptical century."¹⁶⁰ For them, his Catholic past did not signify the extent of his betrayal, but rather the possibility of his salvation.

Instead of accusations of atheism and impiety, these women preferred lamentations of Renan's "indifference." It was a word that made its way into letters through piety cards, as we have seen, but it was also used by correspondents who objected to a work that would "leave the mind" in a state of "indifference" or lamented that Renan had "arrived at this degree of indifference, which thoroughly degrades the human being and makes of him a renegade."¹⁶¹

The popularity and significance of the accusation of "indifference" can be explained by reference to Félicité de Lamennais, the Restoration theologian and politician. Lamennais led a complex life, oscillating between liberalism and republicanism, ultramontanist and defection, but midcentury Catholics did not need to be familiar with the trajectories and complexities of Mennaisian thought. Rather, they came to Lamennais directly through his popular books and indirectly through the language of a generation of priests and authors who had fallen under the spell of his "potent blend of cultural and political romanticism."¹⁶²

Lamennais's breakthrough work, the *Essay on Indifference in Religious Matters*, depicted a postrevolutionary European society where faith and social cohesion were under siege not from heresy but from indifference.¹⁶³ In Lamennais's virulently anti-Protestant version of history, European society had been in mortal danger ever since the Reformation had unleashed a fatal privatization of reason that reduced religion to the status of a mere idea. Protestantism, deism, and atheism were simply progressive manifestations of the same fundamental displacement of authority from the church to the individual, and successive governments had normalized the notion that religion was a matter of opinion or an instrument of political power. To Lamennais, this complacency—religious indifference—was more pernicious than irreligion because it saturated society with an entirely erroneous concept of what religion was: the notion that it was an object of discussion or modification rather than an all-encompassing submission to God's love and the divine authority of the church. Since the Mennaisian philosophy of history attributed a determining role to ideas, it was the indifference of elites that led society into error and that must be combated at every turn.

¹⁶⁰ Veuve Elinson to Ernest Renan, August 14, 1864, CSR, Ms37.86.

¹⁶¹ Cornélie Delort to Ernest Renan, October 1, 1863, CSR, Ms24.72; Anonymous to Ernest Renan, December 1863, CSR, Ms24.13.

¹⁶² Gough, *Paris and Rome*, 62.

¹⁶³ Félicité de La Mennais, *Essai sur l'indifférence en matière de religion* (1817), in *Œuvres complètes*, 12 vols. (Paris, 1836–37), vols. 1–4.

These two central Mennaisian ideas, the slippery slope from criticism to atheism and the responsibility of elites for popular religion, suffused pious women's letters to Renan; but so did the compassionate sensibility of Lamennais's Catholic Romanticism. The concept of fatal indifference offered these correspondents a language for understanding the threat posed by Renan's work, while gendered notions of feminine compassion suggested strategies for intervention. Through imploring letters and objects that celebrated the sacred bonds between church, nation, and family, these women wrote to Renan with the hope of transforming his behavior and inviting him back into the Catholic fold. Their motives thus differed from those of other correspondents, while their language deviated from the outrage and satire of press reactions. They demonstrate how certain individuals understood and responded to Renan's book through a specific brand of mid-century piety that, as their private letters to this distant author suggest, they practiced with conviction and dedication.

CORNÉLIE DELORT

While the majority of Catholic letters suggested a lack of familiarity with Renan's text, not all Catholics eschewed reading *Life of Jesus* in favor of violent invective or the rhetoric of salvation. Cornélie Delort, a Parisian *bourgeoise* who dedicated her life to the service of Catholicism, combined piety with analytical ability.¹⁶⁴ A general's daughter who lived in Paris until at least the time of Renan's death in 1892, Delort was a friend to various religious orders.¹⁶⁵ Never entering a convent, she does however seem to have remained single, going by the title "Mademoiselle." From a position of apparent financial comfort, Delort engaged in ventures of Christian charity. In the 1850s and 1860s, she copied Italian Baroque religious paintings before donating them to various French churches, and in 1867 she published a short story about being kind to animals as part of an ecclesiastically approved Christian children's library.¹⁶⁶

Delort's largest work was her account of a visit to the Holy Land that she had undertaken in 1859, which she published in two versions between 1861 and 1862.¹⁶⁷ Delort wrote about her voyage to encourage more French pilgrims, es-

¹⁶⁴ Cornélie Delort to Ernest Renan, October 1, 1863, CSR, Ms24.72. All subsequent Delort quotations are from this letter.

¹⁶⁵ See Anne-Emilie-Clara Goguet's will in *Transactions of the New York Academy of Sciences* 11 (1891–92): 2–7.

¹⁶⁶ These included the parish churches of Saint-Pierre, Courbevoie, and Saint-Beauzély, Aveyron. The short story is Cornélie Delort, *La Distribution de Prix, ou la douceur envers les animaux récompensée* (Tours, 1867).

¹⁶⁷ Cornélie Delort, *Une Française à Jérusalem* (Auch, 1861), and *Impressions patriotiques et religieuses d'une Française voyage de Paris à Jérusalem* (Paris, 1862). The first edition seems to have been essentially self-published.

pecially women, to make the journey to the Holy Land and thus to strengthen a Paris-Jerusalem axis that she thought crucial to Catholicism's survival. The book was a tissue of Orientalist stereotypes about dirty Turks and pervasive immorality, intermixed with the odd anti-Protestant diatribe and more innocent jibes about bad wine and inedible salads. It was also a very personal narrative, centering on her individual thoughts and feelings and testifying to her mobility and autonomy. Both she and Renan made the journey at almost the same time, and, for both, the visual evidence of the Holy Land provided a crucial supplementary proof that reinforced their existing beliefs. What Renan called "the Fifth Gospel" was, to Delort, "the living Bible" of Bethlehem.¹⁶⁸ But here came the first of several crucial differences since, like many of his German precursors, Renan saw the link between Jesus and Bethlehem as a posthumous invention of the church that historians needed to extirpate from their narratives.¹⁶⁹

What would have been apocryphal religious sites with no historical value to Renan were thus, to Delort, places of evident biblical spirituality. Her pilgrimage reinforced the orthodox Catholic account of the relationship between history, the Bible, and the Holy Land. In no context was this truer than that of miracles. While she found Nazareth to be "arid" and a place of "little charm"¹⁷⁰—an observation that would have undermined the determining role that Renan attributed to verdant Galilee—she also saw the region as "the cradle" of Jesus's miracles: "The whole of this part of Galilee is peopled with the marvels of his divine activity."¹⁷¹ After visiting the site of the Transfiguration, she walked to the banks of the Sea of Galilee and reflected, "It is from Nazareth that the luminous, civilizing rays of Christianity emerged which, much as the limpid spring flows into the sea, became a pervasive river whose flow nothing can change or halt."¹⁷² She reported, meanwhile, that a visit to Calvary was bound to make a "supernatural impression" on the "truly believing" visitor.¹⁷³

Delort opened her letter to Renan in October 1863 by asserting both her faith and her intellectual independence. In a self-deprecating opening that, as we have seen, was typical of pious women's letters, she requested Renan's forbearance in allowing "a weak-minded, humble believer" to contact him. But immediately afterward, she claimed that "to appreciate [the book] in an entirely independent manner," she "did not read any critique which was favorable or hostile." This protected her from the "moral pressure" of others' opinions. Furthermore, Delort contested the authority of Renan's experience by reporting that she too had re-

¹⁶⁸ Delort, *Impressions patriotiques et religieuses*, 140.

¹⁶⁹ Renan, *OC*, 4:97.

¹⁷⁰ Delort, *Une Française à Jérusalem*, 175.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 176.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 177.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 101.

cently visited the Near East and "trode the ground of Christ." She claimed that this visit had revitalized her faith and replaced doubts with truths and admiration.

After this preface, Delort embarked on an intricate demolition of Renan's book, which she portrayed as misleading on several counts. First, she argued that Renan relied too heavily on "interpretations and suppositions" to make the kind of "upheaval" in our understanding that he desired. Moreover, the book was morally dubious. By denigrating the savior and eroding the priest's right to serve as mediator between Jesus and "the masses," Renan's negative approach took away the latter's spiritual consolation without proposing a new moral code in return. Finally, Delort questioned the basis on which Renan chose one interpretation over another, which seemed to force the sources into conformity with his image of Jesus rather than vice versa. Delort cited numerous examples, particularly Renan's inconsistent attitude toward the Gospels: he appeared to use these sources when they reported Jesus doing something he admired and to dismiss them as unreliable when they did not.

Delort blended explicit Catholic devotion and loyalty to the priesthood with a nuanced, critical understanding of a secular text. There is certainly no question that Delort had carefully read *Life of Jesus*. She peppered her letter with choice quotations and paraphrases, bringing out problems with Renan's tone as well as with historical details. For example, she queried why Renan was prepared to let stand the unsubstantiated anecdote that Pilate's wife entreated him to support Jesus, while subjecting similarly minor details of Jesus's life to intense scrutiny. Despite professing to be "weak-minded," Delort claimed familiarity with the works of Victor Hugo and Voltaire. These clues to her education also functioned to legitimate her criticisms: she was not an Ultramontane reactionary dismissing Renan out of hand, but an independent, literate lay reader. Indeed, despite Delort's defense of the priesthood and celebration of the naïveté of lay belief, her method of refutation mimicked Renan's confident scholarly tone and indeed sought to exceed it in rigor.

Delort's opening gambit was that in inhaling "the divine scent" of the Holy Land, she had felt her faith in Jesus reaffirmed beyond all doubt. This assertion implicitly challenged the special importance that Renan had assigned to personal experience—the "fifth gospel"—as evidence for his faith in the exclusively human figure of his book. Though Renan's reliance on experience may appear to have left him particularly open to this kind of rebuttal, Delort was also prepared to confront Renan on precisely the terrain of textual evidence and interpretation. Delort began by suggesting that Renan relied too heavily "on interpretations, on suppositions." In particular, she condemned Renan's seemingly arbitrary decisions on when to believe or disbelieve the Gospels: "If the writings of contemporaries bother your system, you immediately settle the question by saying: 'It is a passage altered by a Christian hand. The editors of Jesus's words do not understand him, they substitute their ideas for those that they only half-

understand.’” Delort juxtaposed Renan’s whimsical approach to source evaluation with the tone of medical certainty in which he discussed Jesus’s death and in which he described how “thanks to the imposture of a vessel of the heart, [Jesus] avoided a long agony.” Delort sensed further hypocrisy in Renan’s occasional tendency to use the word “God” in describing Jesus, given that the ostensible point of his *Life of Jesus* was to strip Jesus of his divinity.¹⁷⁴

Delort, then, presented Renan with an attentive and purportedly unmediated reading of his text that drew out apparent hypocrisies and logical problems in his “positive” historical method. Delort’s conclusion was that Renan should leave alone the terrain of biblical history if he could not tackle it with certainty, since it upset a religion that provided so much consolation for ordinary people. In this respect, she echoed the conclusions of her fellow pious female correspondents. Crucially, however, this rejection was based not on an a priori defense of the sanctity of the Bible but on demonstrating the logical poverty of Renan’s methodology and alternative explanation. In this respect, her letter provides a curious mirror image to l’Inconnue’s: where a fan of Renan’s celebrated his book with the language of faith and transportation, a detractor derided it in terms of reason and rigor. Viewed in the context of epistolary responses to *Life of Jesus*, these women’s letters suggest the breadth of possible interpretations and uses to which contemporary readers put Renan’s book, orbiting around common concerns about personal religious identity, the social effects of reading, and the nature of historical and religious truth.

CONCLUSION

Life of Jesus piqued popular curiosity the way any modern controversy does, through publicity and public debate; but Renan’s correspondence reveals that the book held a deeper appeal. Men and women from diverse backgrounds overcame economic obstacles, social barriers, and sometimes draconian supervision to get their hands on *Life of Jesus*. They did so because Jesus mattered to them, and they were prepared to look outside the traditional religious channels to find an image of him to which they could relate: a tragic human hero who was distinguished by his charisma and moral integrity. While both admirers and detractors found ways of engaging with the sensation surrounding Renan’s book by writing to him, fan letters are especially enlightening, as they suggest that Sainte-Beuve was right to diagnose the appeal of Renan’s book among a “floating mass of minds” wavering between faith and doubt. There was a middle ground between Catholicism and anticlericalism in nineteenth-century France, and Renan’s admirers sought a

¹⁷⁴ For example, at the height of Jesus’s ministry: “Il y eut alors quelques mois, une année peut-être, où Dieu habita vraiment sur la terre” (Renan, *OC*, 4:136).

coherent way to occupy it. Their letters also offer a tantalizing glimpse into an idiosyncratic genre of epistolary writing that fused modern celebrity with older traditions of spiritual directorship. Like Balzac's or Eugène Sue's correspondents, they believed that Renan's popularizing ambitions entitled them to respond with their judgments and quibbles. But Renan's devotees wrote in language more reminiscent of the confessional than the novelist's mailbag. The most revealing letters suggest that readers who shared Renan's ambiguous relationship to Christianity sought an avenue for religious self-expression that they could not find inside the structures of official Catholicism. It is unsurprising that women should be so prevalent here, since they were formally or implicitly excluded from alternatives to church such as free thought associations or republican politics.

These traces of the popular reception of *Life of Jesus* underline the more fluid spiritual politics that reigned before the culture wars of the Third Republic. The confrontations over education and church-state relations that engulfed France after the 1880s eventually pushed Renan's book back into the center of controversy. In 1903, eleven years after Renan's death, militantly secular republican associations funded the erection of a statue of the author in his hometown of Tréguier in Brittany. The opening address was given by no less divisive a figure than Émile Combes, a belligerent agitator for the separation of church and state who railed against clerical ignorance in Renan's name.¹⁷⁵ While the election of Leo XIII in 1878 heralded a more conciliatory tone on historical matters from the Vatican, a new generation of intellectual converts to Catholicism nonetheless matched Combes's intensity with the scorn they heaped onto *Life of Jesus* and its author.¹⁷⁶ The poet and diplomat Paul Claudel held Renan uniquely responsible for the destruction of his family's traditional faith, and a disgusted rereading of the book became a standard trope of many Catholic reconversion narratives.¹⁷⁷

While the vicissitudes of Renan's long-term legacy are beyond the scope of this article, the letters he received urge us not to see these processes of appropriation as self-evident. They echo Sudhir Hazareesingh's suggestion that virulent anti-clerical secularism was simply "one of the possible configurations" to emerge

¹⁷⁵ Émile Combes, *Une campagne laïque: 1902–1903* (Paris, 1904), 348–68.

¹⁷⁶ See esp. Leo XIII, *Providentissimus Deus: Encyclical Letter on the Study of Holy Scripture* (November 18, 1893). An ambitious attempt to bring Leo's ideals to fruition is examined in Dominique Trimbur, *Une École française à Jérusalem: De l'École pratique d'Études bibliques des Dominicains à l'École Biblique et Archéologique Française de Jérusalem* (Paris, 2002).

¹⁷⁷ See the letters extracted in Henriette Psichari, *Des jours et des hommes (1890–1961)* (Paris, 1962), 140–54. For the role of *Life of Jesus* in Claudel's spiritual autobiography, see Paul Claudel, *Mémoires improvisés, recueillis par Jean Amrouche* (Paris, 1954), 22. On conversion narratives, see Frédéric Gugelot, *La conversion des intellectuels au catholicisme en France (1885–1935)* (Paris, 1998), 92–93; and generally Hervé Serry, *Naissance de l'intellectuel catholique* (Paris, 2004).

from the Second Empire intellectual heritage.¹⁷⁸ Though men and women of the early twentieth century would have been forgiven for thinking that *Life of Jesus* was an uncomplicated beacon of anticlericalism, even a cursory glance reveals that the book's cultural meaning was at the mercy of shifts in cultural and political context. Though he lived until 1892, Renan was slow to warm to the Third Republic, subdued in his support for political secularization campaigns, and increasingly certain that religious belief (excluding superstition) remained a prerequisite of social harmony.¹⁷⁹ Meanwhile, prominent secularists tried to disown him. In the late 1870s, for example, Émile Zola attacked the historian for being too ornate and pseudoreligious to provide an authentic scientific role model for the new republican youth.¹⁸⁰ Free-thinking republicans decisively claimed Renan only when the Dreyfus Affair opened up deep fault lines in French culture.¹⁸¹ As the anti-Dreyfusard Ferdinand Brunetière noted with distaste on witnessing the 1903 festivities in Tréguier, republican memory could only fete Renan as an icon of secularism by emphasizing *Life of Jesus's* symbolic value as a challenge to Catholic orthodoxy. This meant eliding its author's dubious politics and scholarly equivocations.¹⁸²

Only further research can establish how much new readers absorbed these debates when they opened *Life of Jesus* in the later nineteenth century, but an unbroken thread of correspondents certainly continued to associate Renan's book with some kind of alternative to the predominant divisions in French culture. In 1879, the same year that Renan took his seat in the Académie Française, a woman wrote celebrating how he had reconciled the "sweet divine ray of Jesus" with the "indefinable, complex, and troubling" realities that confront "our poor modern hearts."¹⁸³ Six years later, as the government purged theology from public universities, a male fan declared: "I am like you, sir, profoundly religious, without being reconcilable with any of the existing forms of religion or with the supernatural."¹⁸⁴ Apparently the young Catherine Pozzi, whose diary entry from 1897 opened this article, was only the latest in a long line of readers who felt that there was something intriguing and distinctive about Renan's work and who put trust in their private judgment to decide whether he was right.

¹⁷⁸ Sudhir Hazareesingh, *Intellectual Founders of the Republic: Five Studies in Nineteenth-Century French Republican Political Thought* (Oxford, 2001), 286.

¹⁷⁹ Jean Balcou, "Renan, l'Église et l'État," in *Les Bretons et la Séparation 1795–2005*, ed. Jean Balcou, Georges Provost, and Yvon Tranvouez (Rennes, 2006), 131–35.

¹⁸⁰ Émile Zola, "Lettre à la jeunesse," in *Le Roman expérimental*, 5th ed. (Paris, 1881), 57–105.

¹⁸¹ On the Dreyfusard appropriation of Renan, see Christophe Charle, *Naissance des "intellectuels," 1880–1900* (Paris, 1990), 152–53.

¹⁸² Ferdinand Brunetière, *Cinq lettres sur Ernest Renan*, 2nd ed. (Paris, 1904); pieces originally appeared in *Ouest-Éclair* in late 1903.

¹⁸³ Annette Boste to Ernest Renan, 1879, CSR, Ms37.110.

¹⁸⁴ Armand Heurtel to Ernest Renan, March 31, 1885, CSR, Ms24.107.